
i
melt
with
you
Anthony Cedrone

ANTHONY CEDRONE

I Melt With You

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Prologue

"Movie star, pop sensation, fashion icon, author, pioneer–a living legend, soon to be something more. It is my pleasure to introduce the flawless, luminous, chrome-kissed goddess, Cinderella."

Applause. Music. Sound effects.

She glides onto the stage, her calves extended into high-heel blades, rose-gold and bedazzled, so sharp they whisper against the floor. White-hot lens flares explode across the screen, reflecting off her skin as she steps into the studio lights.

The host, brown suit and iridescent tie, shakes her hand, head tilted up, struggling to meet her gaze. She smiles like a crescent moon, her teeth shimmering, lips stretched across spotless skin. She tosses her pastel-pink hair over her shoulder before sinking gracefully into the seat next to the desk. A silver dress hugs her impossible figure, nearly invisible.

"We are honored that you're visiting us again tonight," says the host, his smile too wide, sweat already beading.

"Thank you, Paul. It is a pleasure to be here," she replies, her voice airy and musical.

"Last time you were here, we talked about your newest single, *La La Love You*, which had just come out."

"That's right," she purrs, looking at him closely, her eye color

drifting from lavender to turquoise.

"Since then, it has dominated the charts for sixteen straight weeks, and it shows no sign of slowing down. How does it feel to own the air?"

She giggles, personality bubbling as the crowd cheers.

"It's truly an incredible feeling, I had no idea it would turn out like this," she sings, eyebrows raised. "It's really thanks to all the hard work of my producers, my team–and most importantly, my fans."

She turns to the crowd and makes a heart with her hands, the LEDs along her fingers blinking pink.

"I love you guys, thank you so much!"

Applause. Music. Sound effects.

Fake hearts twinkle around the frame like confetti.

"The world has a real affection for you, don't they? Why do you think that is?"

She ponders for a moment, cheeks puffed, finger on her chin.

"I think, sometimes, we could all use a place to escape to. My music and movies do that for a lot of people, and I think they appreciate it. I appreciate them right back!"

She hugs the air and kawaii graphics dance across the screen.

"Some are calling you the last pop star." His smile falters slightly. "Is that true?"

She laughs like glitter.

"Of course not! Anyone can be a princess. And it doesn't have to be through music. Educate yourself. Express yourself. Spread joy however you can. I think the world really needs it right now."

The applause grows in volume.

"How inspiring. And you've got another big announcement for us, isn't that right?"

"I do, Paul." She turns again to the crowd, her hands resting stiffly on her lap.

"Ol' Neptuna, one of my most favorite companies and sponsorship partners, has nearly completed a super special project, and I will be the first to join, to test and make sure it's perfect for everyone!"

Her eyes flick to something off-screen.

"That's fantastic! Can you tell us a little more?"

"Of course." The camera zooms in as she speaks.

She stares down the lens, her smile eclipsing the screen.

"We all know the world is changing. But Ol' Neptuna has been working on something truly revolutionary–a place where we're free from limitations, where we can exist as our true selves. Ol' Neptuna has created a paradise for all, and I get to be the first to step into it."

"And what is this paradise called?"

"Good question, Paul…"

Her chest gently rises.

"It's called The Sea."

1

West searched for the red machine, directionless, hoping to be drawn in like a magnet.

The jagged edges of the city cut him into pieces. A bar soap jingle looped like a ghost in his ears–thin, distorted. His head was imploding–turning his brain to paste and forcing it out through hairline cracks in his shattered skull. His feet were heavy, trudging through wet cement, socks soaked through. The piss-stained sidewalk might as well have been up to his chest, sludge shovelling into his throat.

It was death. He was dying. Yet he couldn't wipe the smirk off his face.

He'd left B4By's an hour ago, maybe less. The bass still rattled his ribs. The bigs developed a cocktail bomb of ash, synthene, and do0m, cackling madly, offering fifty creds to anyone psycho enough to try it. West hit it for free. It obliterated him, disintegrating every sign of life–every thought, everything feeling. He didn't exist. It was euphoric. They took it away when he begged for more. He offered them seventy creds, but they left for another club.

He found the red machine tucked away behind a broken ATM on 106th Street. It stood seven feet tall with decades of stickers and graffiti covering the molded plastic frame. He inserted his

right hand, fingers together, into the crusty leather slot until the bioport in his wrist clicked into place. It was cold.

The whole thing smelled faintly of antiseptic and sweat. He tapped the screen with his left hand, but it didn't register–years of caked up shit dulled the capacitive elements. He went for the finger-polished, metal buttons on the side instead while the leather cushion inflated around his hand, limiting any unwanted movement.

The bloodscrubber whirred and bubbled as it gently circulated his blood through the filter. His head swirled at the initial kick, then his skull relaxed its death-grip on his brain. In the dim reflection of the machine's plastic cover, he caught a glimpse of his face–eyes hollow, skin too pale under the streetlight, inky black hair standing up like an electrified rat's nest. And his stupid smirk. He put his round sunglasses back on. Even the night was too bright.

His haze finally broke as the device chimed. The leather cushion deflated with a wheeze and set his hand free. He flexed his fingers; pins and needles. He could no longer taste the static on his tongue and his headache was gone. A full detox for only a couple creds.

His smirk faded. *Business tomorrow.* This one job had been gnawing at him. He might've slipped again, right then and there, if he had more. He dreamed of cocktail euphoria.

The city smelled different after a scrub. The exhaust burned the back of his throat, the festering garbage stung his eyes, the sludge bubbled, releasing pockets of rot that popped like old sores. Scrubs should've made him feel better, but they only revealed how he was actually feeling, and it was never good. He breathed it all in anyway, pulled his jacket tighter, and stepped back onto the street. He was hungry, appetite unphased by it

all.

He planned to walk to McGrub's for a burger, but his feet took him to the bar. The sign blinked neon: Crack-Crack in blue, Crackity Jones in pink. The two lights alternated in sequence, flickering on and off with an electric *clink* before lighting up simultaneously.

The sidewalk desperately needed some rain to wash away the dried puke. A large rat licked at the stains, its fur matted with dried sludge, fearless of West's approach. The outdated draft menu glowed a broken orange, buzzing in his ears. The sheet metal exterior was corroded, untouchable and dangerously conductive–one of José's security measures. His teeth rattled in its magnetic field. All but the door could kill him in an instant. A chill rolled over his back as the cooling element in his jacket kicked on.

Ultra-sweet, candy glitch-pop blared from the tinny speakers–a shock to West's ears, and to the other patrons as well, their faces in a sour wince. This was not the usual playlist, but West didn't hate it. He kinda liked that dollwave shit, in an ironic way. It felt cold, like ice, like it could cool him off.

He sat at his usual stool on the left corner of the bar and was surprised at how quickly his fingers returned to picking at the exposed yellow foam seat. It smelled bad in here; sickly sweet and bitter, like something pretty was fermenting in the trash. He heard talking in the back and waited for José to come out and scold him. He'd know. Even through the sunglasses.

"José is busy with a lady friend," said a gruff voice a few stools down.

It came from a hairless man with a thick neck that sat hunched over his drink. His skin was veiny and purple. A brown surgical

tube jutted from his throat, dipping into his glass like a straw. He was drinking something blue that bubbled when he spoke. "She just came in. Guess she's gonna cover while he's away."

He knew the man, went by Gabby. They had a few late-night talks together. He worked in waste management. Probably saw a lot of sludge.

West greeted him with a nod. "José goin' somewhere?"

"He was talking about going to the–" his drink gurgled "–the Keys."

West raised his eyebrows, more out of social expectation than surprise. "Didn't think they were still around. Good for him."

He picked at the seat. The conversation lulled enough to bring attention back to the music. As he looked around, he noticed he was the youngest one there. What'd that say about him?

"Hope we're not stuck listening to this shit," Gabby said, taking a sip from his throat. "Don't wanna die to it."

West recognized the singer. She was hot news lately. The TV was barely audible, but he caught the auto-captions in a passing glance.

…will be the first to enter The Sea...

Gabby gestured to the beer tap, "Help yourself, bigs, that's what I did."

West leaned over the bar and poured himself a drink; synthetic whiskey this time, non-alcoholic. He couldn't slip, couldn't booze, but he could enjoy the taste. He let the plasticky burn sit on his tongue before swallowing. It was terrible.

The back door squealed open and caught his attention. José emerged, wiping his hands on a rag and then tossing it over his shoulder to the woman behind him. She was short and sharp-featured, wearing a black outfit over her black skin. She wiped

her augmented hand and scanned the bar with a practiced look, sizing up the regulars before introducing herself.

"Hey y'all, my name is Mel. I'm gonna be filling in for José."

The patrons greeted her lazily, like tired cadets.

"If you need anything, ask me. Let's give José a break, yeah?"

They grunted, and she began to refill glasses, rolling her shoulders, settling in for a long shift.

José caught West's eye and grinned, his gray hair standing up, gelled by sweat and grease, his mustache dark and neat. "Figured you'd be here. Butcher anyone lately?"

"Tomorrow, actually. Optic aug needs rooting."

José hunched over, looking into West's eyes. "You ain't slippin', right?"

"No," West answered.

"You can't be on that shit, bigs. Not for a job."

"I ain't on it."

"So you won't mind if I slip right now?" asked José, eyes narrowed.

"Be my guest."

José fished a do0m capsule out of his shirt pocket, waving it in front of West's face before twisting it into the bioport on his wrist. The green-tinted liquid drained away and he exhaled.

West kept a poker face but felt his throat tighten. His bioport itched. *Business tomorrow*, he thought. Plenty of time after. All the time after.

"My vacation's earned, bigs," said José, louder and slower. "I can afford this."

West rubbed his neck. "I get it, Zay. Apply myself. I'm workin' on it." His mind wandered to last week's botch job.

He had been lucky with the recent influx of corpo clients wanting to take off their company's child locks. Used to just

be punks. But now these corpos had visuals, aurals, spacials, pleasure dampeners, focus stims, all sorts of things their bosses could wield.

He figured do0m would help him work. More time to think, more time to react. Corpo augs were like ticking time bombs once the warranty was removed. Blue signals would overload the battery, violently blowing it apart. And that was the real danger–some augs couldn't be removed first. He could use the extra breathing room.

Didn't work that way though, just turned his hands to shit. His thoughts raced forward but his nervous system lagged behind. He kept telling himself to cut the link, but his fingers couldn't catch up. It threw him all out of sync. The aug blew in this one corpo's head, burning his scalp and rupturing his eardrum. He thought they might sue–but that would mean revealing they'd been at his shop. Instead, some hired muscle jumped him the next day outside of Crackity Jones. Might've killed him if José hadn't come out with a shotgun and scared them off.

He sipped his drink, let the burn settle, then touched his ribs. Still hurt.

He looked to José. "Gabby says you're goin' to the Keys?"

José didn't answer, he only nodded slowly to the music.

All I'm sayin', pretty baby...

Then he inhaled deeply. "You hear this shit? It's fire." He turned the volume up. Broken beats and sugar-coated, elastic melodies flooded the room.

"Like it was made too fast on purpose–meant to be slowed down. Feels different now…You hear it?" He turned his head to the side. "Mel, who's this?"

Mel and West answered at the same time. "Cinderella."

The last pop star.

"Cin-der-ella," José repeated sluggishly. He started to dance with small, microscopic movements, barely noticeable.

West wondered if that was what he looked like last night. The club speakers had pounded the same music into his head. It was still good, but Zay was right: it was better hazy.

Mel wiped the counter in front of him, lifting his glass and placing it on a coaster. "Guess he likes my playlist. 'Nother drink?"

"Synthene" He said instinctively, then he remembered. "I mean water. Got a job tomorrow."

"Slicin' up eyeballs?"

He laughed. "That what Zay said?"

"He said a lot 'bout you. Good things," she answered.

West looked over to him, watching him dance until the haze took over. He slowed to a crawl and laid down on the sticky floor. He was back up after a couple minutes, making conversation with the regulars.

West drank iceless water until José left an hour later, but not before saying goodbye to everyone. He ran the bar for seven years without a day off. The patrons dapped him up and said nice things. He hugged West for a while and spoke slowly.

"You can slip, but don't fall." Then he tucked something into West's shirt pocket. "Take it easy, bigs," he whispered.

When he finished his goodbyes, he wheeled his luggage out the door and climbed slowly into a skybus.

The bar settled in and before long, and the patrons chatted up Mel like she owned the place.

West knew the Keys already sank below the sludge. There was nothing left. Silver was the only place anyone could call

home. And José wasn't coming back home.

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out José's gift. It was another do0m capsule. Tomorrow's job flashed in his mind. He weighed it in his hand, tucked it back in his pocket, and left, tired and sober.

Morning came too soon.

* * *

West slipped out of a dream seconds before his alarm, shutting it off quickly to avoid the worst sound in the world. Hard light from the ads outside sliced his room into electric blue chunks, prying through the wooden blinds and hitting his face directly. Pictures of bubble-butts and coffee-pop burned into his retinas as corpo jingles invaded his ears. He blinked away stars until his eyes adjusted. He wanted nothing more than to drift back to sleep and slip away into his silent fortress, but the day forced its way in front of him.

His fingers ran along the beige, bumpy-textured plastic molding that surrounded his bed and pressed the square 'Tea' button. The porcelain cup on the brushed metal tray quickly filled with hot, synthetic ginseng.

The callbox rang on the other side of the room, its edges blinking green. On the screen was a yellow-haired girl with chopped-up bangs, round glasses, and tired eyes. It was Toonie. West waved his hand and answered from bed, putting his sunglasses back on.

"Yo, Toons. Mornin'," he yawned.

"We're so fried, bigs."

The callbox captured none of the humanity of her usually warm voice.

"How so?"

"Fuckin' Ol' Neptuna is buying INform. It's a fifty mega-cred deal." She sipped from a coffee-pop.

West's thoughts hadn't quite caught up to him yet. He just blinked slowly. The air conditioner behind him rattled in agony.

Toonie sighed. "That means they're gonna catch us if we don't pull out now."

"Catch us, how?" he yawned again.

"My uncle bro, c'mon."

Koyo was helping INform build their Di7 database: verified, true information, confirmed by real human experts. He OD'd five months ago. His will requested that he be buried underground in a real cemetery, but Toonie didn't have the creds for it. They had a brief funeral before dropping his body into the sludge canal. He was not a cool dude. Toonie laughed as he sank, but the tears in her eyes were sad ones.

They copied Koyo's BioID to a sunChip: all of his vitals and credentials looping forever so they could be scanned as if he were still kickin'. His bank account, health insurance, retirement fund–it would all stay accessible.

She had been signing her uncle into INform every day for five months by plugging the sunChip into her rig while softlined to their network. She didn't work, so Koyo didn't get paid, but they hadn't fired him yet. This gave her exclusive access to the Di7 datastream, which she sold in fragmented packets over pirate networks. She shared it with West and he used it to access schematics of classified augs so he could pull in more corpo clients.

Toonie gave some of the creds she earned to West, for no reason other than that she was groovy. His own money went to food and rent, but Toonie's charity helped advertise his business.

His name had circulated the mod scene recently, getting his site a few hits. He owed her big time. He was building her a cooling jacket like his, but dark red with reflective stripes down the sleeves. It sat on a workbench in his shop and he tinkered with it every morning.

Then Toonie's words finally registered. This buyout would fuck all that up.

"So that's it? We're done?" he wondered.

"Yup." She pulled her gray shirt over her knees. "They announced it thirty minutes ago."

"How long before they notice?"

"No clue. I'm grabbing what I can before I cut the cord."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

Dollwave played in Toonie's room over the silence.

Could his shop, with the occasional corpo debase job, keep the two of them afloat? It used to belong to his grandparents. They ran a sauna that mimicked a hot spring, with big fake rocks and plastic trees surrounding the baths. The cherry blossom wallpaper still clung to the walls despite the humidity. West kept the shop ice cold now. Customer's liked it, and it helped him feel like he was slowing things down a bit, even if it was only on a molecular level. A temporary escape from the torment.

He thought about José and almost told Toonie.

"I've got a job today," he said instead, sipping his tea.

"That's good."

Her voice was flat. Distracted. He could see her monitor reflect the datastream in her round glasses.

He looked back to his mug. The steam slowly curled away.

"Yeah."

West finished his tea, bit into an orapod, and got dressed. He

wore dark-gray pants despite the heat. They were his second skin. Then a lightweight button-down tee with a repeating diamond pattern, teal and maroon. Over that was his cooling jacket, as always, brown synthetic leather that hung down to his knees. Then he lathered sunscreen on his face and topped it all off with round, extra-dark sunglasses.

He spit out the orapod and fed the fish. They drifted slowly around the recessed aquarium wall that he built. That whole section was mostly bird nests and rat shit when he moved in. The pink fish was his favorite, bright and contrasted against the turquoise pebbles, but he didn't name it. He never named anything. He wondered if new parents felt the same way about their kids nowadays. Names wouldn't make the end any easier.

The door pulled itself closed behind him and the walkway lowered with a deep rattle. Rusty wrought iron beams coated with chipped orange paint connected the two ends of the apartment complex, giving him a path to the elevator. His heart skipped a beat every time he reached the center, where the corroded metal frame dipped violently under his weight. Hundreds of feet to fall–another way to die.

The rubber bubble flooring of the elevator liquified in the heat, clinging to his shoes as he entered. Noxious fumes replaced the air.

Someone was already inside, leaning in the corner. A wrinkled woman with wiry white hair, a tan sunhat, and a Syomin brand filter mod across her nose. The filters looked ridiculous.

He reached for the ground floor button.

"Already pressed it," she said. Petrified gum hid the broken bulb behind the button.

West smiled, nodded, and admired the collage of stickers by

the door as they moved down. A couple more appeared each day. The newest depicted The Monkey drinking a can of Ol' Neptuna water.

On the third floor, another person stepped in: a middle-aged woman with neon-yellow athleisure clothes. Her skin and hair were dyed orange to hide her hairline. Her copper fingers reached for the ground floor button.

"Pressed it," said West. The nose filter woman just blinked at him.

The orange lady had brushed-metal legs from the knee down, sneakers tied tightly around her feet. West could hear music playing faintly from her aural augs, more dollwave. She waited by the door and got out first when they finally reached the bottom.

A sickly, brown-green hue awaited him. From one noxious fume to the next, he stepped out into the city. Brutalist concrete slabs. Impressionist steel structures. The south side was cooked to a crisp.

Silver towers, thoughtlessly placed, bent sunlight into scorching death rays that burnt the sidewalk and fried anyone who passed through them. Smog kept anything further than a block away hidden behind a gray haze. The streets were crowded with hopeless faces. Few still tried to maintain some semblance of beauty–makeup piled on top of plastic skin, expensive suits draped over skinless limbs. Others didn't try to hide it. Dead: mutilated corpses with augs and mods that clung to life, miserably waiting for their batteries to die. Some had already expired, splayed out on the asphalt like melting ice cream, dripping into the sludge that pooled along the curb.

Steam burst out from the laundromat vent, blowing into

West's face as he passed by. Then his cooling jacket kicked on. To his left, gas cars crawled across the road, sputtering as fuel boiled. Hovercars soared above, air conditioners at full blast. Not a bird in sight.

A news truck drove by, its giant screen blinking with giant headlines.

Ol' Neptuna Buys INform in 50 Mega Credit Deal
Cinderella First to Join The Sea
The Monkey, Saint of The Dead - Gone Forever?

Guess the buyout was real. Soon he'd be broke–Toonie too. He doubted anyone was actually hiring right now. Couldn't hurt to check. He slipped into his go-to corner store.

The doorbell chimed a dead tone. TVs plastered the wall, flashing images of Cinderella in advertisements for Ol' Neptuna's canned water. Dollwave played on the speakers. A hairy shirtless man dripped sweat onto the counter, counting cred chips.

"Mornin' bigs," said West as he grabbed an instant egg and *Pusk!* coffee-pop, Toonie's recommendation.

The man barely nodded. He was counting to himself, whispering the numbers.

West held his wrist up to the pay machine. It punched his bioport and beeped for confirmation.

The man was Manuel, the owner. He always wore a chain around his neck, but this time it was off, blistered skin where it usually hung.

"So, bigs…" West said, still standing in front of the counter. "You ain't hirin' are you?" He knew where everything was in here. Saw it every morning. Could stock shelves in his sleep.

Manuel didn't look up. "Nah bigs," he said.

West laughed to himself. He mostly asked as a joke anyway.

"Right. Well, stay cool, yeah?" Then he left. The doorbell chimed again and Manuel didn't flinch.

He finished the egg before he reached the street his shop was on. It was a narrow and slightly curved path with painted blue cobblestone and no room for cars. He couldn't help but feel claustrophobic sometimes, like it would all fold in on him.

Hongmei stood outside her own shop, smoking a cig, leaning against the window. The neon sign in the window blinked 'Open'.

"Happy Today!" she greeted with a big smile.

West smiled back. "Something special happenin'?" he asked, wiping sweat off his brow.

"Somewhere, probably." She took a drag. "But we made it to today. That's something to celebrate, right?"

Hongmei ran a nail salon, massage parlor, and bakery all in one building. West hadn't seen a customer in her shop for over a year, only old friends who she never charged. She looked thin, her gray hair matted, her eyes dark.

"Never thought about it like that," he said, shifting his weight to one leg. "You're right," he smiled, trying to match her positivity.

She flicked her cig to the ground. It rolled into a sludge puddle and burst into flames, then sizzled into nothing. "You want a bagel? I made too many," she asked.

He didn't, but something tugged at him saying he should. His grandparents went there all the time, often bringing him along. Maybe it was nostalgia. Or maybe it was guilt.

"If you're not too busy…" he answered.

"Busy? Ha!" she laughed, stepping into the shop, waving him

in.

The inside was painted a happy yellow. Happy to him, at least. There were some yellows that felt really bad. Like the Morikawa ads that shined through his window. When they cycled to the yellow logo, they'd sometimes wake him up, tricking him into thinking it was the morning.

Hongmei pulled two bagels out from the glass display case and handed one to West. It was already toasted and lathered with synthetic cream cheese. He opened his mouth to take a bite but Hongmai shouted.

"Wait!" She ducked under the counter, grabbed two half-melted candles, and stuck them into their bagels. Then she flicked her silver thumbnail open and lit them.

"Happy Today to us," she sang.

West sang along.

"Happy Today to us."

Then they blew out the candles and ate their bagels.

The hanging board above his shop looked as old as ever–warped, faded, paint chipped to hell. It translated to Garden 5 Sauna, but he had put a little sticker underneath of a blue tiger with big claws. It's what he told clients to look for.

He'd always wanted to be a debaser. Wanted to wreck shit. Fix shit too. Unlock the true potential of even the crappiest hardware. He just never told his grandparents. They thought he was some corpo dev who worked on software. Both passed away a couple years back, together in bed. West inherited the sauna. Now it was the debase shop. He didn't name it.

He flicked on the lights, kicked on the cooling, and cracked open his coffee-pop. On the workbench was Toonie's red jacket. This one circuit kept frying and sparking. He blamed his shaky

hands. This would be the third replacement. He sat down and tinkered with it until his appointment.

2

Color-coded dots flickered, awaiting input. Drives murmured in dull electric tongues. Mono-dats shook hands through industrial cables, cooled by running ice, networked across a grid of black storage towers, all leading to a central machine.

The overhead fixtures were off, but the cove lights projected vivid blue caustics that shimmered gently across the ceiling, illuminating the cigarette smoke that clung to the tiles.

The woman smiled, crimson lips parting audibly, and ashed her cigarette into the glossy black tray. Her voice was rich and deep, enhancing her trans-atlantic accent. "That is very good news," she said, looking at the man's lips. They were glossy and smooth. "Here's to tomorrow's success." She held up a mimosa and clicked her glass against his.

"Here's to you," he said, looking into the woman's eyes. "I couldn't have done it without you."

She sipped her drink and smiled again. Fresh oranges sat like a painting in a basket on the table. "Nonsense."

"It's true. Without your support, none of this would be possible." He shifted his weight. "You've been my guiding light, Sandra."

"Michael…" she said, looking down at the oranges. Her long red nails stroked a silver spoon.

He placed a hand on top of hers and leaned closer.

"I'd like to spend the rest of my life with you."

Her eyes caught his–deep blue, bluer the ocean–staring into hers. She looked back at the oranges.

He traced circles on the back of her hand, watching her face closely.

"Please say yes," he said, tilting his head. "This could be our home."

She felt his stare burning into skin. Then his grip tightened.

"Sandra…" he whispered. He didn't blink. He never did.

"Sir," said another voice from the doorway. A technician holding a datapad.

Michael turned to face him, scowling. "What?" he spat.

"The numbers are good, but calibration is two points below our desired levels. Perhaps one more–"

"Yes," he said, standing up, straightening his tie. "Yes, one more session." He downed his mimosa, looking everywhere but her face. His posture changed as he took a step forward. "I'll take care of it," he said, power walking out of the room, leaving the woman alone at the table. The pressure of his hand lingered on hers. She blinked, looked out the tinted penthouse windows to the dark orange sky, and blew smoke with a sigh.

3

Her toes touched something cold. The hip implants. She'd been using the small pair since she got here. Easier to sleep in. She kicked the other pair off the side of the bed and they rolled out of reach.

Her eyes followed dark streaks down the pastel wallpaper. Ruptured flex-tubing leaked black coolant like mascara down a cheek. The washer unit upstairs had an unbalanced drum that hammered against the casing, rattling the room. The ceiling's once-white paint, now spiderwebbed with cracks, peeled off in dull curls and dropped to the ground. This was supposed to be the presidential suite. She knew Olivia would be in soon, but she picked up the pieces anyway.

Skyview 26. She'd been here for a week now. The name made it sound like she should see something grand, but all she could see was Skyview 27–the next building over. She'd peek across the plaza sometimes, resting her forehead on the glass, looking into the other rooms, flipping through windows like TV channels. She watched for exciting moments: sex, parties, fights, murders. She didn't take any pleasure in them, but watched all the same. The rooms were all empty right now.

The holes in the flex-tube sort of looked like a face. A little crying frowny face. She couldn't help but feel bad for it. She

tried duct tape but it just pooled up and spilled over, soaking the wallpaper and staining her bed sheets. She nearly shouted at the face, ready to blame it, but she apologized instead. It must be having a bad day, she thought. Wasn't it's fault.

She was going mad.

This used to be a high end place. She'd been here once before, during a tour, and they had massage chairs, ice baths, aug chargers, and fancy breakfasts with real bacon. Now they didn't even have bagels. Guess nothing was high end anymore. The musty scent of wet wallpaper glue reminded her of something though. Something long forgotten.

She wiped the streaks off the wall with a dirty shirt and laid on her side. The bedsheets rubbed against her legs like sandpaper and her mini-skirt and crop-top clung to her skin like tin foil. The sensitivity was still jacked. She tried attenuating it with the pin in her finger but couldn't get it right. She rolled over onto broken glass as documents crinkled under her. Contracts. Waivers. Legalese. Carlo said they looked good so she signed them. Her chrome fingers paged through them one more time, then let them fall to the floor.

She grabbed Jem's vape off the nightstand and took another hit. Her silver nails impulsively picked at the chipped camo pattern laminate as she inhaled. It had a metal tang to it, nearly expired. If she was a good partner she would replace the cartridge before Jem got back. Olivia could do it tomorrow.

They said she had to stay here until everything was ready. Apparently this was the best place they could find. She just couldn't be at home since they were scanning the interior of the castle, taking measurements and making models, all so that they could, supposedly, recreate it for her exactly as it was. But with more customization, they said. She liked that. She felt

suffocated when things weren't changing.

There was never anything on TV, yet she couldn't stop watching. She found the remote under the pillow and turned it on. She flicked through channels and landed on herself. A clip of a recent interview–maybe three weeks ago. They played it over and over, the way they always did. The talking head said her name, and the ticker at the bottom scrolled fast with buzzwords like 'inevitable' and 'last resort' and 'mass migration'. People were freaking over The Sea. Some were desperate to join. Others called it a slow suicide. Either way, they all watched her. She'd be the first.

Three taps on the door, barely audible. It must've been Michael. It was his time anyway.

"Come in," she said, guessing which tie it would be. *Penguins*, she thought. She flipped her pink hair over her shoulder.

He carried a heavy plastic case into the room and set it on the nightstand.

"Hey, princess. How's your day been?" he asked, kneeling down to open the case.

He wore a baby-blue dress shirt with an iridescent baseball tie, a brown belt and holster, navy pants, and shiny leather shoes. He only ever changed his tie, everything else stayed the same. Penguins would've been better. His dirty-blonde hair looked different today though. Parted to the other side, maybe.

"Dull," she replied with a sigh.

"Well," he said, the locks clicking open. "After tomorrow, everything will be different. For both of us."

Everything will be different, she repeated in her head. Was that a promise?

He rested the contents of the case on the side of the bed and

she sat up to make room.

"Any questions before we begin?"

She shook her head.

"Alright, then," he said, plugging all sorts of things into her aug jacks–a few in her head, some in her chest, and the smaller ones in her fingers. "You know the drill."

Michael dimmed the lights as the test began. Static filled her ears first, then a slow, churning hum, like an ultrasound of a whale's heart.

"Calibration starting," Michael's voice was distant, flat.

A line of color ran across the black of her vision, red to orange to yellow, moving faster each time. She had to track it, predict its next move, but she lost it–dizzy. The machine beeped.

"Try again," he instructed. "Don't think too hard."

Easy for him to say. The line appeared again and she followed it. The aperture of her optics were completely shut and she shouldn't have seen anything, but the colored line lingered–green now. Then she lost it again. *Beep.*

"Try again," his voice was further away.

She did. The line changed colors, this time it was teal.

"Good," he said. "Calibration complete. Proceeding to–" his voice blurred into the static. She imagined him melting away, leaving only his stupid baseball tie.

She smiled but didn't feel it. Her arms and legs were hollow. She flexed her fingers–they barely existed. A trickle down her spine startled her, making her think she had done something wrong. She braced for the machine's beep, but it didn't come.

This is just practice, she thought.

Just the whale's heart now. It was almost relaxing.

It slowed.

And slowed.

And slowed.

The hum stretched apart into empty voids, long enough for paragraphs of thought to form between each thump. The teal line turned to blue.

She took a step back–

Her footing crunched.

A thought shattered.

Michael?

The words lagged. Echoed. Too late. Too slow.

This was more than before. The blue line deepened.

She felt herself drip. Like wax.

Liquefying, spilling forward into the blue.

Splashing.

Shattering.

Someone was crying.

"And now?"

She tried to reach for her hands, her knees, anything–but her body was too far away.

She tried to shout but her mouth filled with blue.

It tore at her throat.

Something was wrong in the rhythm. It stretched, widened, ate at the edges of her.

Ate her thoughts.

She desperately clung to what remained.

Wood grain and damp glue.

It slowed.

Slowed.

The whale's heart stopped.

Only silence.

A vacuum. No feedback, no breath, no her.

Then–

3

Too much, too fast. A raw feed punched through the soft meat of her consciousness.

It made holes, then filled them, cauterizing the wounds.

There was another voice. A new one. It came from everywhere.

It whispered something. A single word.

Dive.

Something cracked.

It wasn't the machine. It wasn't her aug jacks.

It was her.

Static rushed back in, filling the room, filling her head, her chest.

She gasped, lungs burning.

Her eyes opened.

Michael was in front of her, pressing a button on the console.

"And now?" he asked.

The room blurred, the world tilted, but she was here. She felt the rest of her pour in.

"Better," she lied through heavy breaths.

"Peaceful this time?" he said, smiling.

Her throat was raw. She swallowed.

"Very."

The case clicked shut.

"After tomorrow, everything will be different."

His smile was tender–well practiced, his lips soft and cared for.

"Washer's done. Olivia will bring them once they're dry."

She nodded.

"Thanks, Cindy." He opened the door. "Have a good night."

It closed gently behind him.

4

He couldn't tell if the tremor in his hand was the shakes or his nerves. If this went poorly, his hustle was over. Might get hit with bats this time instead of fists. Bullets, maybe. He really had to perform for this one.

Dollwave music played through the shop's speakers. Not his first choice, but figured he should appeal to his clients more. Everyone liked this shit.

A man reclined in the blue patient chair and stared at the ceiling. His hair was black and neat and his suit probably cost more than a few month's rent. The scanner buzzed as it verified his optic aug. A Syomin IVO Mk.4 in need of rooting. He was another corpo. They paid well, but could also have you killed for one misunderstood look. This one's name was Robbie. That's what his chart said at least, but West didn't push for names. Corpos especially liked their privacy.

Robbie blinked and stretched uneasily, jaw clenched. "Nice and cool in here," he said, his breath visible.

"Coolest place on the south side," West replied, glancing at the scanner. This aug could be removed first. No problem, no worry. Just a simple couple of screws. The hard part came after. He rolled his stool behind Robbie's chair and checked his hands again. It had to be the shakes–they came quick.

This would be an easy one though. It didn't matter how dangerous the aug was if he could get it out of the guy's head first. And he could do that while slippin'. What he couldn't do was delicate work while his hands were twitching all over the place. He could ruin the aug. He could seriously hurt the guy. He was dangerous like this.

José's do0m capsule burned a hole in his shirt pocket.

"You believe in The Monkey?" asked Robbie.

West held the capsule between his fingers. "Do you?"

"I saw the headline. They say he's dead."

He had a lot to say but couldn't think. The capsule dropped from his shaky fingers.

"Don't know, bigs."

Fuck, he was too nervous to talk. Why was this getting to him? He could slip into a nice calm state. Work at a steady pace. Be productive, make the guy happy, and get paid. Pay rent. Buy food. Pay Toonie.

He needed no further convincing. He picked up the capsule, blew on it, and pressed it to his bioport without twisting.

You can slip, but don't fall.

José's words looped in his head, less poignant now. Was this falling? Nah.

He twisted and drained it dry. His heart slowed and everything got steady again. Good. This was just the right amount.

He picked up the drill from the charging dock and rolled his cracked leather stool closer to the man. His hands were steady, his thoughts were synced, and everything was still sharp. Just a couple of screws.

He looked at the clock on the wall.

3:16pm.

"Alright," he said. "Let's get started."

As West approached, Robbie shivered.

"You good?" West asked.

"Good," he replied.

West leaned in and lined up the drill. Easy. The spinning bit pulled the first screw loose. Then he moved on to the next, his finger just about to press the trigger, when Robbie let out a guttural, primal scream. He grabbed West's arms and linked their hands together, locking their fingers around the drill's grip. West tried to pull away–his muscles lagged behind. Robbie forced the trigger down–teeth bared, eyes wide as the drill spun to metallic screech. He plunged the cold metal bit into his own forehead, carving out a deep hole. Shards of bone stung West's cheeks like shrapnel as Robbie pulled it out then inserted it again. Then again. West struggled for control of his hands. With one last plunge, Robbie's manic screams hiccupped into distorted whispers. His body jerked and his face twitched before he finally went limp in the chair. The drill spun freely inside the half-inch hole, whirring and squelching until West pulled his hands back and pried Robbies fingers off the trigger. The spinning stopped hard, flinging warm globs of brain matter onto his face.

He felt like he'd just been struck by lightning.

Hearing oscillated between one and one-hundred. Nerves were raw and unwinding.

His own heartbeat vignetted the corners of his vision. One beat per minute, then less, then more. The haze was easing him down but panic tightened around his neck.

It took him forever to realize what he was looking at.

First, he placed the drill on the cart and wiped the wet flesh off his hands. Then he wiped his face. Just more sludge. It was all around. Silver was full of it. That's why he kept his shop

cool–to hold it back just a little longer. Soon the only thing left would be broken augs and stainless steel bones.

He could feel the corners of his mouth pull upward.

This couldn't have been his fault, right? This guy was just psycho. His eyes scanned the body for any sign of life. Nothing. He watched drops of viscera fall from the plastic chair cover onto the tile floor, tapping on the ground in an uneven rhythm. He counted the seconds between drips. Then his mind wandered to the neighbors. Had anyone heard? Had IMPOL already been called? He peered at the entrance to his shop, half-expecting the glass to clear, but it stayed frosted. Do0m dulled his panic into curiosity. No one knew. The ache in his ribs returned and he rubbed them, smearing blood across his shirt. His mouth was dry. His fingers moved on their own, swiping Robbie's file open.

Robbie Frantz, 26, Male
Morikawa Junior Sales Manager
Optical Rooting

Suicidal Psycho, it should've said. He glanced at the clock again. 3:16pm.

His thoughts refused to click together. IMPOL might be on the way. They'll scan his bioport logs–they'll see he slipped first. Shit, he was really slippin' now. The fear made it stronger. Seconds became minutes. He thanked the chemical gods that he didn't have to face this sober.

Inhale. Exhale. Visible breath, still cold.

If only he could cool off the sky and make clouds with his breath.

Should he call Robbie's family? But they'd just call IMPOL.

Then IMPOL would involve the corpos, and debasing their augs was like butchering their pets. It'd be a death sentence. He'd rot away in a cell–turn into sludge. Maybe this was part of The Wave he kept hearing about. Maybe shit was just that fucked. Everything was imploding.

He weighed his options for an eternity, dread ebbing and flowing. The edges of his shop softened, the blood on the floor almost making a picture. Gravity was increasing. Shit was just going to get slower. He couldn't help but imagine the crash he'd feel later, but that wasn't his problem yet. His problem was the dead body in his shop. Was it dead?

His fingers gingerly felt Robbie's wrist for a pulse. Then he almost laughed. Of course.

He looked everything over and tried to be disgusted, but it was too late now. His face finally gave in to the haze. The fuzz.

He couldn't stop it. He never could.

He smirked.

Before he knew it, he dialed a number on the shop's hardline. It rang slowly. He waited forever, getting lost in the dial tones. It felt like the connection was swimming miles upstream. Then the line finally clicked open.

"What's up, bigs?" Toonie's voice, slower than usual.

He hated that he was pulling her into this, but he had no choice. He whispered so the neighbors wouldn't hear. "I'm so hazed right now. Need your help."

"Can't remember a song?"

"No, this is–you busy?"

"Just been waiting for you. What happened?"

West looked at the time.

3:16pm. Pizza o'clock. Every Tuesday.

Even with all the time in the world, he still couldn't be where

he needed to be.

"I lost track of time. Sorry."

"Should I be worried?"

West wondered how to answer. He came up with a million responses but said none of them.

"West? Be real."

"It's pretty mes-sy," his voice trailed. "But it's not my fault. There's a body here."

"A dead one?"

"Yeah."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

West looked over to the chair. Blood was pooling on the floor.

"Toons, I'm gonna be way too gone to han-dle this s-oon, can you…"

"I'll be there in ten."

She hung up.

It took her ten hours to arrive.

* * *

One line ran from Robbie's optic aug and the rest jacked into West's Orbis PR-2266 with a Kovacs S-link node probing each pin. He realized he only studied the IVO Mk. 3 schematics. He had no clue there was an Mk. 4 already. Encryptions fluttered across the monitor. Nothing he could make sense of.

Toonie had her portable rig wired up to it, taking over admin control. She sat cross legged on a chair in the corner of the room, as far away as she could get from the body. She'd get dizzy at the sight of blood and it was clear even the smell was challenging her composure. West had time to clean up some

of the mess, but the corpse had all the presence of a black hole and he found himself mostly staring. He'd seen plenty of bodies before, usually a couple a week, but they'd been unrecognizably melted into puddles of multicolored sludge. Robbie's body wouldn't rot for some time–it just kept dripping its contents onto the floor.

West sat on the stool by his workbench. Toonie didn't like when people shoulder surfed. He tucked the red jacket away and tried to stay patient, but it felt like she was taking forever.

"Any progress?" he asked. The plan was to wipe out any view of them from Robbie's optics before moving his body somewhere and calling IMPOL from a public hardline.

"It's running too fast," she said, face glued to the screen.

West looked back at the flickering code on his rig. It was readable to him. He started reciting each character to her. Must have been slurring because she cut him off.

"That's not helping."

"Oh, sor-ry," he droned. She sounded mad.

He rubbed his wrist. Her typing made a relaxing sound, like rain against a window. Rain was a big deal when they were kids. All the neighbors would come outside and celebrate, dancing in it, collecting it in barrels. It hadn't rained in six years. The only storms now were magnetic, and they rendered radio waves useless. The hole in the sky only grew. Now there was a hole in this guy's head.

Toonie inhaled sharply, looking up at him. "West. Unplug it. Now."

His stomach knotted. "Why?"

"The encryption isn't just corpo–it's *live*."

Shit. He made his way over to Robbie but slipped on blood and soap, banging his head on the chair and falling to his knees.

"Fuck!" shouted Toonie.

West's dizzy eyes scrambled for the plug. His fingers crept toward it but Toonie pushed past him and gripped the aug, tearing it out of Robbie's head–sparks and tissue flying–dropping it and stomping it with her heavy metal boots, crushing it to pieces.

West watched, frozen.

"I saved some of it," she said. "It's decrypting now."

Toonie was so small and quiet. He'd never seen her do anything like that.

"Di-d they se-e us?" he asked, unaware of the slurring.

"Think so."

"How mu-ch?"

"We'll find out."

Then her head rolled and her knees buckled, but she caught herself. She breathed and returned to her spot in the corner, washing her hands and splashing her face at the sink. Then she curled up like a cat and pulled her shirt over her nose.

West felt bad. He'd never get another client after this. Wouldn't be able to repay Toonie for being so groovy. She'd have to get a real job. Forget about him.

He knew the answer but he asked anyway, "Yo-u ok-ay?"

"Yeah, West. I'm okay."

That was two West's in a row. This was bad. He continued, "Why do yo-u think he came h-ere?"

"For an optic root?"

"I me-an to end him-self. Why here?"

"Maybe he didn't plan it. Spur of the moment."

Those words had weight, even through all the haze.

"It's the fuck-ing Wave isn't it?"

"Might be."

West didn't know what to say next. All the thoughts he had had been squeezed out of his ears, juiced like an orange. The rest of his brain was next. He shuddered at the thought of a drill in his skull. He'd slow down to a crawl soon, then crash. He just kept feeling bad for bringing Toonie into this. He tried to hide his smirk.

"Sorry, Toons. I didn't–"

"It's fine," she said. "See you in a few."

He tried to stay there, but as she said that, he slipped away. Usually a slip feels like an extra day. This one felt like a whole month.

* * *

"Look at this," she said, rolling her chair over.

He opened his eyes, blinking away a dream about squares inside rectangles, and how they were supposed to fit but never did. His head was throbbing.

Toonie turned her shoulder so he could see the screen. It was 3:45pm. He peeked at her desktop and realized he had never actually seen it before. Half a dozen open windows, debug logs, system diagnostics–and buried under all of it, a Cinderella wallpaper.

He was being such a shithead right now.

Toonie snapped her chewed-up fingers in front of his nose, "You with me?"

He sat up, "I'm here. Need a detox."

"Later. Look."

The feed began, visualizing fragments of what Robbie had seen. Noisy, aberrated, and only video, no sound. It went in reverse, with Toonie's boot uncrushing the aug, then West's

panicked face, blood splatters. They saw him.

Black boxes glitched across the image.

"It's not perfect," she said.

Then it was just the ceiling of West's shop.

Then it skipped. The feed struggled.

Suddenly, Robbie was driving fast–backwards through the city airway, blurred rooftops in the corner of his vision. He slowed to a crawl, stopped at a light. His head turned, looking out the window, his reflection faintly visible.

His face was twisted. Horrified.

He was looking out to the canal. It overflowed with sludge, bubbling and boiling violently.

A red pool sat on top like oil, swirling.

Then it burst. An eruption of steam.

Puss. Bones. Flesh.

It all coalesced into a figure, organs inflated, sheets of melted meat glued back together.

The body writhed in agony as it returned to life, birthed from the sludge.

Egg whites of eyeballs poured back into their sockets and solidified like cooling wax.

Teeth gathered together, sinking into place under swollen red gums.

A mouth puked out sludge and blood.

West couldn't look away.

Muscle. Sinew. Skin.

The figure was left standing by the canal, clothed and unharmed.

It was a man. A familiar face.

The Monkey.

Robbie looked back at the windshield, his face calm, driving

backwards again into the city.

He ate, showered, slept, and then the feed stopped.

It was silent.

West's cooling jacked kicked back on with a shiver.

"Did you see that too or am I–" he gagged.

"I saw it."

"Corrupted data?"

"Maybe. But it looked real."

"Visceral."

"Yeah."

"I'm gonna–"

He puked out Hongmei's bagel into the bloody soap bucket he cleaned with.

Toonie puked on the floor right after him.

Happy Today, he thought.

5

Cindy bit into a muffin, expecting the blueberry crags to cut the roof of her mouth. It was fine. At least the sensitivity was fixed. Testing always made her hungry. They let her have one muffin a day.

She stood by the sink, her toes cold on the tile, and watched Olivia fold her clothes, placing them on the beige chair by the window. The cushion had little palm trees on it.

"Do you have a family?" asked Cindy, breaking the silence. She'd been thinking of asking for a while.

"Sí, miss," answered Olivia. "Two little ones. And a husband."

Cindy examined the muffin closely, little specks of sugar on top. "Forgive me for asking, but do you worry?"

"About?" asked Olivia.

"About them. The end. All of this."

"No, miss."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." She folded a silver dress. "No point."

"In worrying?"

Next were leggings.

"Nothing I can do, right?" said Olivia.

"Right," said Cindy, taking another bite. "So you pretend everything is okay?"

She picked up the empty clothes basket and walked toward the door. "I know God will take care of us." She smiled. "Anything else, miss?"

Cindy smiled back. "That's all. Thank you, Olivia." Then she took another bite.

Her mind wandered to Ms. Beach, probably the closest thing to family she had.

"Sí, miss. Goodnight."

As Olivia reached for the knob, the door exploded inward, slamming into her face with a dull crack. She staggered back, hand flying to her nose. A large figure stormed in.

It was Jem.

"What the fuck are you doing?" her voice cut through the room like thunder.

Cindy could only stare, mouth full of muffin.

Jem loomed over her, sunburnt and sweaty, dog tag tapping against her chest.

"What. The fuck. Are you doing?" she repeated, stopping just short of the kitchen area, boots still on the pink carpet. She wore a blue Hawaiian shirt and camo cargo pants.

"I'm eating a muff–"

Jem slapped the muffin out of her hand and it burst into crumbs. She gripped Cindy's face, squeezing her cheeks together.

"You're not fucking doing this," Jem growled through clenched teeth, her grip tightening. "Not you."

Cindy opened her mouth, then shut it. Now was not the time for jokes. She had seen Jem mad before, but not like this.

"You didn't call. Didn't text. I had to find out on the news–"

"You were on vaca–" she coughed, nearly choking.

Jem exhaled sharply, loosening her grip. "Fuck, Cin. Swallow

first."

Cindy forced the dry muffin down and started again.

"You were–"

"Shut up," she barked, locking her hand around Cindy's thin arm. "We're leaving."

She pulled Cindy to the door and glanced at Olivia, who pressed a trembling hand to her nose, blood running through her fingers. Olivia didn't say anything. Didn't move.

"Sorry, ma'am," Jem muttered.

She dragged her down the hall, Cindy's bare feet burning against the rug as she struggled to keep up.

"Jem, calm down. Holy fuck."

"Fuck you. What were you thinking?"

"You're hurting my arm."

Without slowing down, Jem swept Cindy off her feet and held her like a bride.

"Better?" she asked, bounding toward the elevator.

Cindy looked up at Jem's face. She could feel the heat radiating off her. Sweat dripped from her faded green temples and her skin was red and peeling. She looked in her eyes for tears and saw none.

They turned the corner.

Michael stood in front of the elevator, surprised.

Cindy watched his eyes assess the situation.

"Is everything alright, Cindy?" he asked, turning his smile on.

"Everything is fine," Jem answered. "Excuse us." She towered over him.

Michael's blue eyes stayed on Cindy. She could feel herself being studied.

Cindy smiled and tilted her head, running a hand over Jem's cheek. "We're going out for some fresh air. I'll be back soon."

Jem moved for the elevator and Michael stepped aside. The doors slid open slowly.

"If you're not back by curfew, we'll send someone to pick you up," he added.

Cindy put on the Cinderella voice–airy with soft consonants. Barely different from her own.

"Thank you, Michael. Have a good night."

Her eyes twinkled like stars next to her crescent moon smile.

Michael only stared.

Jem stepped into the elevator and pressed the ground floor. The doors closed.

"You're getting heavy," she said.

"It's the new heels," Cindy replied.

The rest of the way down was silent. Cindy felt Jem's heart pound in her chest and her muscles shake, but she didn't put her down.

The car was parked diagonally between two spots. It was a retro ground model. Blue.

Jem threw Cindy in, checked if her fingers were clear, then slammed the door. She got in on the other side and slammed it again, the black leather seat creaking under her weight.

Cindy exhaled. "Look, we're here. Just slow down, okay?" She met Jem's glare. "I've been through a lot lately, you have no idea."

Jem fought to catch her breath. "Fuck." Her knuckles were white around the steering wheel.

Cindy watched her. The air was thick with sweat. She settled into the seat, rubbing her arm, Jem's handprint still pink on her skin–the unmodded part.

"I know you're angry, but–"

5

"Is anyone coming after you?" Jem asked, eyes on the rearview mirror.

"What? I don't know."

Jem threw the car in gear and peeled out. Something rattled like a fork in a blender as they picked up speed.

"Where are we going?" Cindy asked, but it wasn't long before she recognized the route they were taking. "The pier?"

Jem stayed quiet, her breath still heavy.

The drive was tense. Jem kept her eyes on every car that drove behind them, her shoulders stiff and elbows locked. When a black Auric 700 took the same turn as them, Jem nearly erupted.

"It's not them," she said, quickly. "Michael drives a white car."

That didn't stop her from driving around the block a few times.

When they arrived, Jem stepped out without a word and walked to the end of the dock. Cindy watched through the window, waiting for the right moment to join her.

The water was lower than last time, barely a foot deep. Gentle waves rolled in a thick layer of peach-colored gunk that caked up and coated the wooden pillars. It looked like rotten yogurt, gurgling and bubbling along the coast, sometimes letting out bursts of hot gas. It made a squelchy lapping sound with the occasional pop and sizzle. Heat waves rippled over the horizon, the large, boiling mass approaching slowly, taking over the ocean. Even with Silver's high elevation. It wouldn't be long now. The sludge would consume it all.

Cindy was overcome with sadness. Her mind wandered to the whale's heart.

Could there be any whales left down there? Was she the only one still singing?

She noticed Jem sway and drop to her knees, puking into the water.

Now was probably the right moment.

She got out of the car and knelt behind her, placing a hand on her back.

"It's fucking…" Jem retched. "…vile."

Cindy looked to the sky. "You don't think it looks pretty?"

The struggling sunset lingered over the distant island of sludge.

"No, I can barely breathe…"

Cindy took a deep breath but smelled nothing.

"Huh, I can't smell it."

This set something off inside Jem. Her entire being shifted.

"Because they fucking butchered you, Cin," she exploded, pushing Cindy's hand away and standing up. "Cut you down to nothing but a pretty face and a brain–and now you're handing them what's left?"

Cindy blinked, taking a moment to process. She looked into Jem's eyes but didn't see any tears.

"I should've been around," Jem said to herself, turning away.

"Then why'd you take a vacation?" she retorted.

"Are you that dense?" she swung back into Cindy's face. "There's nowhere to go. Look around."

Cindy looked back at the city skyline. It was foggy. "But your fancy shirt and the sunburn–" she added.

"I sat on my roof for five minutes. But you…" she looked closely at Cindy's face, her flawless porcelain skin sparkling in the sunset, not a single drop of sweat. "Perfect little Cinderella. Can't ruin the product."

Jem turned away quickly.

Cindy tucked her hands in her skirt pockets, hiding their

chrome plating. Her fingers touched Jem's vape. She forgot she brought it. She picked at the plastic coating.

"So you were here the whole time?" she asked.

"Yeah. Had to get away from them. From you," she said, sniffling.

"I don't understand."

"Of course not! They probably started taking your common sense too!" she roared, grabbing Cindy's shoulders. "I tried to be cool about the augs, the mods–put up with it for years. Your choice and all…but fuck, Cin…"

Cindy let Jem shake her. Her head rolled around as Jem's grip tightened.

"I was ready to die with you. We could've gone together. But you–" The words choked her. "This is all we fucking have left. And you can't even be here for it."

Jem collapsed to the floor and took a big shaky breath. "Fu–" she couldn't finish.

Cindy watched the tears stream down Jem's cheeks. They pooled under her red nose and fell to the ground. She reached to wipe away her own, but her fingers touched nothing but smooth, dry skin. She tried again, harder this time, blinking, feeling everywhere–but there was nothing. Only a lump in her throat. She swallowed but it didn't go away.

"Jem?" she called, softly.

Her chest felt tight, heavy. Her brows furrowed.

"Jem, I–" her voice quivered. "I feel it. I do. But–"

Jem was heaving, clutching her stomach.

Cindy knelt down slowly next to her, legs wobbling.

"Something's wrong, Jem," she whispered. "I–"

Jem held out a calloused hand. Cindy took it and wrapped her cold, artificial, perfect little fingers around it.

6

"Think anyone will be looking for us?" asked West. He was certainly sober now, but he could barely withstand the pressure of his shrinking skull. He wrapped Robbie's corpse up in a tarp and Toonie begrudgingly helped him move it to the alley behind his shop.

"Don't know. Hope not. Still worried about the datastream."

They waddled like penguins through the narrow passageway.

"Oh yeah, how'd that go?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Toonie looked to the sky and took a deep breath, trying to steal even half a lung of fresh air.

"Was gonna cut it before I came here. Didn't yet," she gagged.

His cooling jacket was on full blast, even in the shade of the alley. No one could escape the heat. This must've been torture for her.

"Want my jacket?"

"What I want is to get this fuckin' body out of here," she said, nearly tripping on a thick weed.

West waited a moment for his square wave of a headache to dip in the troughs, then he continued to make things worse. "Sorry, Toons. I panicked. I ain't gonna slip again."

She didn't reply. They reached the car in silence. Toonie drove a yellow G4-R junker with a black velvet interior. Trash

covered every seat and the tires were flat, but it still drove. When they lifted the body to the trunk, the tarp unraveled and Robbie's cold arm smeared blood across Toonie's chest. She blinked, then fell to the ground, hitting her head on the cement.

West took his jacket off and fit it onto her. He kept a hand under her head and hunched over her, blocking the sun. The huge ball of fire slammed his back through his shirt, a feeling he wasn't used to.

She laid on the ground for a while after coming to. She didn't say much except 'thanks' when she noticed the jacket. He lifted Robbie into the trunk and looked around. No one saw. The trail of blood could've been from anything. He took the keys from Toonie and started the car. She sat quietly in the passenger seat while they drove to the canal.

After a few minutes, West broke the silence. "You think he's gonna be there?"

"Who?"

"The Monkey." He wondered how The Monkey ended up in the sludge. It didn't look like he jumped. No one else was there.

Toonie pushed up her round glasses with her pinky and looked out the window. When she drove, she could barely reach the pedals and look over the steering wheel at the same time. West had adjusted the seat and he knew he'd forget to set it back.

"Why?" she asked, settling into West's jacket.

"You don't think he's real?" he asked again.

She sucked her teeth, "I don't know, bigs."

Bigs. Maybe she was cooling off.

"So…what? It was just a glitch?"

"What do you mean?"

"Robbie's feed, The Monkey."

She looked at him with knitted brows, but didn't answer. Probably still mad. He didn't know why he cared so much–about how angry she was or The Monkey. They'd fought more in the last few months than ever before. Everyone did. Was just a part of the end. Still, he didn't like when people were upset with him.

Then he looked at the time.

"Pizza after this?" He tried to sound normal.

"If I get my appetite back."

It wasn't a no. This was good. He pushed it. "And maybe a–"

He was going to say 'drink', but then he remembered José. Fuck, he'd be so disappointed right now.

"You remember José? José Jones," he asked.

"Of course."

West sniffed. "He's gone."

"Gone where?"

"The Keys."

"Oh," she said, with an understanding tone.

"Yeah."

Then the rest of the trip was silent. They dropped the body into the canal. Toonie stayed in the car, but West watched as it sank into the sludge, boiling into a tie-dye swirl of blood and puss. He also looked for any signs of The Monkey's remains, but once the sludge took something away, it never gave it back.

They ordered pizza from McGrubs. West stopped at the red machine on the way to pick it up, but all that remained was melted plastic, charred metal, and empty do0m capsules. The next closest one was across town. Toonie said a detox would only postpone the shakes anyway. If he was gonna get them,

then at least he could get them over with. She was probably right.

They took the pizza to Crackity Jones for drinks. He thought of José the whole way. Didn't know how, but he knew he was gone–felt it in his bones. Worst part was, he barely remembered the times they spent together. Mostly just the hangover after. He knew there were good times though. Felt that in his bones too.

7

Jem unpacked a new air freshener and hung it around the rearview mirror. It didn't help. She tried to wipe the smell away from her nose but everything stunk, even her hands. She turned on the AC but it did nothing.

Cindy watched curiously. "What's it smell like?"

Jem inserted her car key. "You ever have a rat die under your fridge?"

Cindy's brows bent upward. "A little mousey? Thankfully not," she said, voice light and playful.

Jem wiped her puffy red eyes again. "Well it smells like a million billion, dead rats. Mixed with shit. And piss. Like they all pissed and shit and puked together in a pile and died."

"You have such a way with words."

Jem turned the key and the car barely started. It rattled aggressively. She sat there, hands on the steering wheel, avoiding Cindy's gaze.

"So, am I taking you back?" she asked softly.

"You mean back to Michael?"

"Yeah. Is that what you want?"

"Well," she chewed her tongue, "I signed the contract. Did you read it?"

"You never sent it."

She meant to send it, but she didn't know when. Their break was indefinite.

"They want me to do some more testing," she said, tapping a metal nail against the dashboard clock. "But I've still got four more hours," she pouted, coyly.

Then Jem smiled. The first smile she'd seen in over a month. She soaked it in, studying the way her chapped lips parted. The way her dark-blue gum piercing sparkled between her front teeth. The way her left-canine tooth was chipped from the mortar accident and how she chose not to fix it. She felt warm for once. Jem looked back at her.

"Where to then, princess?"

If this was the last thing she ever looked at, that would be okay.

"Well?" Jem asked.

Cindy smiled back. "How about the arcade?"

Jem punched the car ceiling–sunglasses dropped, and she caught them on her face.

"Excellent choice, your majesty. Let's blow some creds!"

The tires screeched as she whipped the wheel, making donuts before pulling back onto the road. Cindy liked this Jem, but it was rare recently.

They drove in silence for a while, listening to the car rattle, until Jem spoke up.

"Why do it? The Sea."

Cindy thought for a minute. She came up with a dozen answers but sighed instead.

"I don't know."

Jem's hands tightened around the wheel.

"I can see how it could be a good thing," she muttered. "But

why you?"

"Why me?"

She knew why.

Because they'd all follow her. Only her. She was special. And she could be special forever. At least in their eyes. She almost explained but swallowed the words. It was more than that.

"I don't know," she said.

It was more than that.

* * *

The neon hum of the arcade swallowed them whole. The air was thick with fried food, working circuits, and the faint metallic musk of old coins. Rows of machines flashed and flickered, painting their faces with vivid colors as they stepped onto the glow-in-the-dark carpet. It was like stepping into another world–a temporary sanctuary from everything outside. The floors were crowded with desperate souls who hovered next to central air vents, dousing themselves with cold drinks. Cindy wore Jem's sunglasses and grabbed a hoodie from the backseat, tightening it over her head. They loaded up a bucket with obsolete currency and wandered over to a retro fighting game that still used a CRT display.

Jem cracked her knuckles and gripped the grimy joystick. Cindy inserted the coins. White noise and square waves burst from the dying soundboard, in sync with the slow-moving sprites on screen. The worn plastic buttons, caked up with years of sweat and grease, delayed each input by an unplayable amount. Cindy's fingers automatically compensated for the lag, leading to a flawless victory against Jem. She stuck out her tongue and made Vs with her hands as orange LEDs blinked

across her fingers.

Basketballs flew chaotically in Jem's lane, but Cindy made perfect arches, reaching a new high score. She watched Jem struggle, her strong arms forceful and sloppy. She stepped behind her, pressing her chest against her back, slipping her fingers over hers. She guided Jem's hands, demonstrating less power, more finesse. Jem took the shot and sinked it in. For a moment, she thought she could smell the sweat on the back of her neck.

Gunshots rang from the reality shooter. The two of them stood in white bubbles that spun as they walked, projecting the crystal-clear three-sixty-degree view of an ambiguous war-torn city. Jem took it seriously, taking cover, preserving ammo, recalling her training. The moment Cindy wrapped her finger around the trigger, her auto-targeting system engaged. Actuators adjusted her aim on the fly, shooting Jem with unmatched precision. Another high score.

With their tickets, Jem bought synthetic cotton candy and a hot dog. Cindy felt guilty for just looking at the snack shop. It was a buffet of gummies, chocolate bars, licorice, fudge, and so many colorful, sweet things that she hadn't been allowed to have for years. She felt like she was skipping school, like she'd get in trouble. That didn't stop her from buying one of everything.

The two ate in silent satisfaction until Jem took a deep breath.

"Uh oh," said Cindy, chewing on taffy.

Jem laughed out the breath, then rubbed her chin. "Cin…I need to–"

"Not yet," she said, standing up, slinking over to another game like a pink cat.

She circled the claw machine, lining up the motors with

maximum accuracy. She waited patiently and tapped the button at the last microsecond. It lowered shakily and caught nothing. Jem shoved her aside, popped her shirt collar, and smirked. She closed her eyes and pressed the joystick at random.

Cindy watched the colorful lights of the arcade illuminate Jem's face in slow-motion. The smirk, the messy green hair, the way her jaw clenched when she concentrated. That perfect jawline.

This was it. The last time.

No more movie nights.

No more long drives.

No more burnt midnight pancakes.

No more this.

No more anything.

Jem slammed the button with her fist.

The claw clenched shut. A prize tumbled into the box.

Cindy's heart raced.

Jem knelt down and reached into the box.

Cindy gasped for air. Something inside erupted, overflowed, took control.

This can't be it.

Jem turned around, stuffed toy in hand–and Cindy crashed into her.

Their lips met hard. She gripped Jem's shirt, afraid to let go.

Jem tensed–shocked. Then she melted into it.

Cindy pulled away, a thin line of spit connecting their lips. "Please don't go," she breathed. Her voice cracked.

Jem inhaled sharply. Cindy squeezed her eyes shut. Too much, too fast. She ruined it.

Then Jem exhaled. A small, breathy laugh. She thumbed the spit off Cindy's chin and looked into her eyes.

7

"I ain't going anywhere, princess."

* * *

Jem's car was parked on a hill overlooking the south-side, next to a glitching billboard. Cindy sat on the hood with her legs crossed, lollipop in mouth, looking up at the night sky. Not a single star.

Jem leaned beside her, searching for her vape. When she couldn't find it she lit her last cigarette. The red ember brightened, then dimmed.

"Two hours left," Cindy whispered.

Jem blew smoke. Neither of them moved.

"What now?" said Jem, searching for stars, cigarette hanging loose between her lips

Cindy's metal fingers tapped against the hood. "We drive around some more?"

"I mean for real. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking, if we met today–for the first time, instead of way back–what would happen?"

"You're still you?"

"Yeah, and you're still you. Would you?"

Jem took a drag. "Hmm, probably not."

"Because of the metal?" Cindy asked.

"Because of the fame. This amount, I mean. It doesn't suit you."

She frowned. "I can't help it. It's not like this is all of me."

"I know that. But do they? Do you?"

Cindy slid off the hood and stood next to her, heels crunching on the gravel.

"I can stop being this, you know?" she said. "Cinderella."

"What would that be like?"

"I don't know." She tucked her hand into Jem's back pocket. "Less stressful. More lonely. But if I had you, then it'd be like our best moments, but all the time."

"In a shitty apartment somewhere?"

"Yeah, and I'd get a job. What job?"

"Seal trainer. Or sex worker. One or the other."

She rolled in front of Jem, pulled the hoodie over her face, and pressed against her with puffed up cheeks and puppy eyes. She patted her hands on her chest and produced a real seal sound from her voice box. Jem winced a bit. She always hated the voicebox.

"Your hands are cold," she said, taking Cindy's chrome fingers into hers.

"They always are."

Jem ran her other hand through Cindy's pink hair, brushing it behind her left ear.

Cindy wrapped her arms around Jem's waist and pressed her head into her chest.

The two swayed under the invisible stars.

"I'm not going to do it." said Cindy, tilting her head up. "Been thinking about it."

Jem looked down at her, listening.

"Someone has to be first," she continued, "but not me. It's not my job to lead them." She sighed. "I've been inside test runs, and it's nothing. Truly nothing. Empty." She tilted her head back down, voice muffled. "And I deserve something. I deserve this. With you."

Jem squeezed her harder.

She closed her eyes. She felt like apologizing for random things, but instead she just squeezed back.

"Let's get a drink," she said into Jem's shirt.

"Thought you'd never ask."

The two ended up in a noisy dive bar on the edge of the south side, sitting across each other at a high table. *La La Love You* played in the background. Cindy had her hood up and sunglasses on so no one could see her eyes roll. It was past her testing time with Michael.

"What are you going to tell him?" Jem asked, biting her finger.

Cindy sipped her martini. "I'm sorry for the short notice, but I won't be joining you tomorrow," she tilted her head. "Good?"

"And if they get pushy?"

"I can handle it. And I've got you." Cindy smiled, placing a hand on top of Jem's. "My strong, shining, sunburnt knight."

Jem grinned, then looked away, taking a shallow breath.

"Uh oh," Cindy said again.

"I…Fuck," she laughed through her teeth.

"It's okay. Take your time. And make it good."

"I don't even know where to start. Uh…" She studied her shoes, then the dirty floor. "I was an asshole, earlier. I hurt you," she muttered. "It-it was fucked."

Cindy sipped her martini and listened patiently.

"I threw you around, said shit like you had no feelings–like an object." She stroked her thumb on the back of Cindy's hand. "And I could've called first. There's no excuse."

Glasses clinked somewhere. A cheers.

"Cin, I want–" she started, but Cindy was looking away, eye's on the door. Her cold fingers tightened around Jem's.

Three men in slim black suits, and Michael in his stupid tie. The other men stood by the door, but he approached, his eyes locking onto Cindy immediately. Jem tensed up and shifted on

her stool.

"Hey, doll," he said through a grin, "Big day tomorrow, it's time to head home."

Cindy smiled and lowered her sunglasses, eyes twinkling. "Hi, Michael. I actually won't be joining you tomorrow. I'm sorry for the short notice, but I've decided to pass on your offer."

Michael sighed and gestured for the door. "You're tired. Head home and get some rest. Think it over in the morning."

"I've made my decision already. Thank you, though," she smiled, teeth like the moon.

He stepped closer. "Let's not make a scene, yeah? It's in your contract."

"Of course," she whispered, knitting her brows and sipping her drink.

He smacked his lips and leaned closer, his breath minty-fresh. "You're drunk. Let's step outside, get some fresh air. You'll realize how *unreasonable* you're being."

Jem shifted in her seat, jaw tightening.

"No, thanks," said Cindy.

He sighed and reached for her arm.

Jem stood up and growled. "Don't you fucking touch her."

His fingers hovered, then dropped slowly.

"Back the fuck off," she added. She was scary.

Michael didn't look at her. He just smiled. "I wasn't talking to you, Miss Brandt."

One of the men in black suits stepped forward. A patron left. The bartender turned her back. West and Toonie sat at their table, quietly watching.

Corpos didn't fear bad press anymore. The press feared them. IMPOL feared them.

Cindy kept her expression cool, but her fingers tightened

around her drink. “Michael, I appreciate the concern. But you need to leave, now.”

“And what if I don’t?” He glared at Jem. “She can’t protect you.”

Cindy eyed the holster on Michael’s belt.

“I can protect myself.”

“Then you’re going to have to,” he dared. “There’s too much riding on–”

She reached for his holster with inhuman speed and pulled out his gun, pointing it at his chest. It felt much heavier than the arcade game.

He smiled, his lips perfectly smooth. The men in suits stepped closer.

As her finger slipped around the trigger, green lines blinked across her vision–aim assist kicked on. Stabilizers in her elbow engaged, then stopped. The green lines turned red and her ears buzzed. The actuators in her shoulder jerked her arm to the side, taking her aim off Michael.

She tried to realign but the motors whirred and forced her arm away again. Then again.

Michael’s smile grew. He stepped back as the suits came forward.

Jem leapt into action, smashing a bottle onto one of their heads, glass crunching under their feet. A fist connected with her jaw and she felt a crack. A heavy metal fist. She spat blood. Then a knife flipped out and danced toward her.

Cindy dropped the gun and regained control of her arm, but her vision went dark. She threw off her sunglasses–but nothing changed. Dull, black static. A suit rushed behind her, arm around her throat, trying to force a crackling taser to the side of her head. She crushed his wrist but he held on tightly.

Jem tore off her Hawaiian shirt and wrapped it around her hands. Blood pooled at her lips and spilled over onto her white tank-top. The knife sliced at her hands as she tried to parry. His cracked skull started dripping down his face. Her eyes darted to Cindy.

She had a second suit behind her, his augmented grip locking around her waist. He held the taser close, it arced to a jack on her temple and she felt her spacial awareness scramble. She brought her foot up behind her, trying to kick between his legs. She connected with his thigh, gritted her teeth, and extended her high heel blade through his femur. He let go. Her heel retracted like a katana, splattering blood across the ground. He stumbled back, grasping at her, pulling her hood down. Someone in the bar howled.

"It's Cinderella!"

"Stop these fucks!"

She felt him get pulled away. Glass broke around her. The other suit was still on her, taser buzzing past her head. She bent her fingers into razor sharp claws and sliced wildly in all directions, hot blood spraying her face.

The knife swiped at Jem, getting progressively more sloppy. She closed the distance and locked his arm in her shirt, breaking his elbow with her knee with sparks and smoke.

The knife hit the ground in front of West. He kicked it out of reach.

Then something tore through Jem's shoulder. The deafening sound came after.

Michael lowered his arm and pointed a smoking pistol at Cindy's head. The barrel pressed warmly against her skin.

The room held its breath.

Everyone wants to save the princess," he laughed Then he

sighed. "Get in the car, doll."

Cindy swallowed hard. Jem stepped forward, teeth bared.

"Ah-ah-ah," he said as he pushed the gun harder to her temple.

Jem froze. Hostage training kicked in. She looked for an opening.

"Walk forward," he whispered in Cindy's ear.

She stepped slowly toward the door and the gun followed. "Jem?" she asked, blinking blindly.

Jem stayed frozen. There was no opening.

Two suits picked themselves and moved over to Michael.

"You'll all thank me tomorrow," he smiled, gelled hair falling out of place.

They backed out of the bar and the door swung closed.

A hovercar whirred outside, starting up and lifting off.

Jem rushed through the door and jumped into her own car, fumbling for the keys. Blood stuck to the hot leather seat as she tried the ignition. Something rattled. She tried again, harder. There was a deep pop, then smoke.

She slammed her fists on the steering wheel, then her head. She tried to scream but her throat locked up. Her body shook too hard to take a full breath. Then she punched the radio until her knuckles split, blood pouring over the dials. The screams finally came.

Patrons slowly wandered out of the bar to watch her.

8

He didn't know why he was the one doing this. Felt like he'd laid his head under an industrial trash compactor. But Toonie nearly fainted again, and the other patrons were too drunk.

Mel swept up broken glass. Gabby throat-sipped his drink.

That just left West. He exhaled and poured liquor on the tweezers.

He didn't even know this woman–she looked like she was gonna bite him. The two of them sat on the floor in the corner, her back was to him.

"I can do it myself," she said.

He held out the tweezers. "Be my guest."

Her right hand shook as she pinched her fingers, trying to grip it, but she couldn't. Blood oozed from the knuckle wounds.

"It's broken," he said.

"I know," she barked. "Just fucking do it."

West clenched his jaw. It would be just like removing an aug. He got the tweezer close, then drew back.

"Do you wanna make small talk?" he asked.

"No," she answered.

"Good," he tried to smile. He flexed his shaky hand, trying to buy time. "What's your name?"

"Isn't that small talk?"

"It's medium talk."

"Why do you want to know?"

"This is surgery. That makes me a doctor. Gotta know your name."

She rolled her eyes. There was no drill here, at least. She couldn't go psycho. He inserted the tweezers.

"It's–fuck!" she roared.

The bullet wedged itself deeper into her shoulder. He pulled his hand back quickly.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Just…nervous."

He gripped his forearm with his other hand, trying to steady it.

"Yeah, I can fucking tell. You even breathing?"

He let out the breath he'd been holding.

"Breathe. Use my back for support. Move your hand up to your wrist, it's more stable."

He rested his elbow on her back and took a couple deep breaths. She was being patient, at least. He adjusted his grip and dug the tweezers back in.

"My name's Jem," she said.

"Jem," he repeated. The bullet dropped to the floor. "Nice to meet you. It's out."

She huffed. "Thanks. Now stitch me up, please."

He sterilized the needle and thread. He wasn't sure if this was the shakes yet, or nervousness. Bad, regardless.

"You do this before?" she asked.

"No. But I've stitched people up before." His eyes wandered to Toonie.

Jem spit blood into a cup and tongued her loose tooth. "Me too." Her jaw was definitely fractured.

His mind slowed. Shit was going too fast. The day was almost

over already. He blinked a couple times, motionless.

"You here, bigs?" she asked, glaring at his crusty bioport. She snapped her fingers until he came back.

"Yeah, don't worry," he smirked. "I'm sober as fuck."

"Oh good."

He squinted, itchy eyed, and pinched the wound together.

She winced. "What's your name?"

"West," he answered, inserting the needle.

The thread weaved gently through her skin.

"I'd say it's nice to meet you but–" She sucked air through her teeth.

He nodded, "It's been a pretty shit day, yeah?"

"Worse than that," she exhaled.

"Well, you're lucky it's today," he sniffled. "Tomorrow's always worse."

He bandaged up her shoulder and poured vodka over his hands into a bucket.

"I'm going to get her back," she said, more to herself than him.

"Yeah?" he stood up, lightheaded. "You a superfan?"

"Number one," she inhaled, rising to her feet. "Wish I wasn't sometimes."

He tried to help her up but she slapped his hand away and stood up on her own.

"Thanks for patching me up, doc," she said, picking up her Hawiian shirt. It was cut up from the knife fight. She left it on the floor. Her tank-top was soaked with sweat and blood. "You're the blue tiger guy, yeah?"

He was surprised. He'd never been recognized before.

"You did some work on my friends. Military root after the malware attack. Probably saved their lives." She held out her hand. "Thanks."

8

He remembered. They were some of his first clients. "No worries," he said coolly.

They shook hands but she winced, forgetting about the broken bones. She went over to the box of bandages and started to wrap her knuckles.

You won't get far, thought West. He almost said it to her. The city was unforgiving and unrelenting. Shit just kept doubling down. He really wanted to go along with it, give into it, be a part of something, but he had no place, no job, nothing tangible. He'd be useless soon, once the shakes took over. Fuck–he'd been useless all day. He'd slip again soon. Then he'd be the one laying in a puddle on the sidewalk.

He looked at Toonie. She was typing on her portable rig, probably trying to sort out the mess he brought her into. He could apologize again, but he didn't. They'd been together since middle school, working on projects, getting into trouble. She should be doing something better. Something real. Not this. He just weighed her down, the gravity of his imploding head sucking her in. The bar felt different anyway, without José. He'd be disappointed too. He took a deep breath and held it. The moment stretched. This was his chance.

When no one was looking, he quietly left the bar.

* * *

He ingested the street. Tasted it. Cars sped past above and below, crop-dusting the roads with deadly fumes that clung to anything–everything. The Dead walked in circles around aug clinics, nothing but thin metal bones and rotting flesh. The moon, red and dull, struggled to shine through the thickening

smog. The dark of night brought no relief from the sweltering heat. Plastic signs dripped away, aluminium traffic poles doubled over, puke fried like eggs on the sidewalk.

It was fucking disgusting. It was all too bitter, too sharp.

He couldn't bear it anymore. Everything had to slow down.

He dialed Vosk. They answered right away and asked West to meet them at B4BY's. He'd be there in no time.

The bus stop was a glass box made of ads playing from all angles. The orange Syomin logo flooded his eyes with promotions for a new physical intelligence model made for service.

He hopped on to the rusty, rain-stained skybus. The lavender seats brought decades of shit and piss with them, baked in and inseparable. The lights flickered a sickly green. West eyed the furthest back seat on the left, pushing past Dead beggars, slippin' parents, and exhausted businessmen. It lifted off with a rattle and flew across the city. The view out the window, as revolting as it was up close, looked beautiful from afar. Silver towers reached to the sky, plastered with football field sized billboards and holographic displays. Every color imaginable flashed in sequence, illuminating hovercar windshields and apartment windows. Smog diffused it all down to a welcoming fuzz–grainy and dreamy.

Before long, the skybus landed at his stop and he stepped off. The ground hit hard. His bioport itched.

He stepped inside B4BY's, following the corridor to the curtain entrance. The bouncer, eyes glowing red, opened it for him. Music destroyed his ears, distorted and abrasive. Dollwave remixes pounded at his chest. His tired eyes scanned the room for Vosk's purple head, ignoring the many faces that slowly

bobbed and weaved across the dance floor. He pushed past dissolving bodies and metal frames to the bar. On a stool was a purple half-bun and a maroon suit.

West stepped up and put a hand on their shoulder, shouting over the music into their ear. "Yo, bigs."

Vosk turned around, what remained of their face coming into view–a gaping hole, fleshless and empty, only saw-blade teeth and piercing green lights for eyes remained.

"West," they said, voice crushed and electric like a revving motor. "Glad you made it. Take a seat."

West climbed onto the stool next to them. Vosk held up two fingers and the bartender slid drinks in front of them.

"On me, yeah?" said Vosk, voice grating.

"Vosk, I actually–I only need do0m. Drink does nothing," he shouted over the music.

"Drink it anyway," they said. "To me!"

They held up their glass. West clinked it.

"Special occasion?" he asked.

"Very," they exhaled like a garbage disposal. "I'm retiring."

"Oh shit," West said, his fingers inching toward his bioport. "Had enough?"

"Too much. I'm done tonight."

The music blared. West thought it might kill him.

"Well, I'm happy for you," he smiled. "But don't leave me hangin', bigs."

Vosk poured the drink into what remained of their mouth.

"You know I wouldn't. No small talk?"

He imagined them smiling and shuddered. "I-I've got it pretty bad."

Vosk signaled for another drink. "Nothing you can't handle. Heard about the cocktail last night."

"It was nothin' special."

"Uh-huh. How biz?"

He squirmed in his seat. "Better than usual. More corpo's comin' in recently."

"I've noticed," said Vosk, punching at West's side. "You're a real bigshot now, eh? Blue Tiger. Proud of you, bigs." They downed the next drink. "I want you to meet someone."

"Who?"

"My boss."

Vosk led him into one of the backrooms. It was smoky, lit with only green lights. Smelled like sweat and perfume. A fuzzy velvet booth wrapped around a small table. West sat on the end.

"You'll be in good hands when I'm gone," said their mechanical voice. "He'll be here soon. Get cozy."

"Who am I–" West started to ask, but Vosk was gone.

He looked around the room and a clock caught his eye. Almost midnight. He was thinking about this nightmare of a day when he felt something on his lap.

A woman–skin green under the lights–backed her bare ass up onto him, grinding against his pants. He couldn't see her face but her hair was long and braided, decked out with glowing beads.

"You like that, baby?" she said, her digital voice tuned and smoothened.

"Not what I'm here for, but thanks," he replied.

"But I'm here for you, baby. I got what you want." Her voice shifted in pitch with each word.

"And what do I want?" West asked.

She turned around. A tangled mess of cables, jacks, and ports made up for the absence of a face.

Her fingers danced across the wires, pulling out a twelve-pin

connector, female end. "Jack into me, baby."

She ran fingers through his greasy hair, feeling his temples.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'm good." Her chest pressed against his legs. She had a tattooed tit that said 'No. 13'.

"You tame, baby?" she asked. "Unmodded?."

He didn't answer. Never wanted mods. Had no choice with his wrist, but that was none of her business. His eyes followed the various cables that came out of her.

She studied him, turned over his arm, and felt for his bioport.

"I know what you want, baby," she said, running her long fingernails down his arm, tracing his input. "I've got just the thing."

She pulled a thin tube out of her throat. Clear liquid ran through it and the end was a capsule sized output.

West heart skipped a beat. It must've shown.

"Ah," she moaned. "That's what you want."

"It's what I'm here for," he muttered. "But I–"

"Shh," she cooed. "I'll take care of you."

She tugged on his belt to stand up. He did.

"Follow me," she breathed.

She walked him through another corridor, hand on his wrist, stroking his bioport. She led him to a dim hallway with numbered doors. They stepped in front of '13'.

"Call me Anda."

"Anda," West swallowed. "Pretty name."

"And you?" she asked, as she opened the door.

Inside was a bed. The dim lightning masked any stains.

"West," he answered.

She pulled him into the room and sat on the bed.

"West, baby, let's get started."

She licked her finger and traced inside of his bioport. It was

corroded from all the use. Then she pulled out the rubber tube, sliding it in but stopping before twisting it–teasing him. The tube filled with clear liquid and she flicked the bubbles away.

He had only ever slipped with a small capsule. But this–her? It would be euphoria. He needed this.

"Beg me, baby," she moaned.

West begged. He didn't think about José this time, or Toonie.

She smiled and twisted the tube in.

"We're locked in together now."

They laid back on the bed, side by side.

He smirked. She whispered something sweet into his ear, but he only heard an endless drone of unrecognizable noise.

* * *

He counted neurons as they fired.

One.

Two.

Atoms spun dizzily in the air, bumping into each other and bouncing away. He felt blood crawl around his body, inching through his veins with every heartbeat. Seasons changed inside of him. The giant angry bear awakened in the spring just to pound the ground and roar.

Then hibernation.

It took him a million years to blink, his eyelids like tectonic plates pushing together.

They closed like curtains to a theater that would never reopen. Old and abandoned.

Then the world ended. Boiled away.

Then nothing.

The nothing was long.

Then life began again. Hot, but cooling.

Soon a new theater was built, and the curtains reopened.

He was in a corner store watching condensation form on the ice-cream cooler. Crystals grew slowly, stacking onto each other, cascading outward. Someone called his name. Touched his neck.

Blink.

He was saying something, his vocal chords swaying in the breeze, but it was too slow to make out. A hairy man stared at him, waiting, arms sticking out over the counter on the side of a red truck. West wanted to read the words painted on it, but his eyes hadn't spun into orbit yet.

Blink.

"Here comes your man," he heard. Then someone took his hand. Matte-black, heavy, motors whirring slowly inside, vibrating the casing. An orange Syomin logo was printed across the thumb. Their sleeve was black, their grip tight. In the corner of his vision was another figure–polished two-tone shoes and maroon dress pants. He could only watch the hand.

Blink.

In bed with the wire-faced woman. No, a backseat–stopped at a red light. She was rubbing his crotch. Do0m dripped into his bioport. He was melting into a puddle.

He thought he saw a familiar face out the window. Hard-boiled eyeballs and disintegrating flesh.

The bear stirred awake and roared, then went back to sleep.

He slept and slept.

9

Jem dragged a screeching barstool across the floor, remembering how her drill sergeant did things. The bar noise faltered. A few people turned to look. Good. She slammed the stool down.

"Alright, you fucks," she shouted. "You saw what happened."

She gestured to the unconscious suit on the floor. Her jaw hurt as she spoke.

"You love Cinderella? Think she's your little pop princess?" She gave them no time to answer. "Well, fuck you," she exhaled, shoulders tensing. "She's mine. And I'm tired of sharing her."

Everyone in the bar was looking now.

"I'm gonna get her back…but I need some help," she said, lightheaded, falling back onto the stool. "Cause I sure as fuck can't do it alone."

Someone laughed.

"She ain't worth it," said someone else.

"Who even are you?" said another voice.

Jem felt her ears get hot, her fist clench. She might have to beat the help out of them.

"I know where she is."

The words cut through the silence like butter.

Jem turned so fast her neck cracked. "What?"

It came from a small, blonde-haired woman with fucked up bangs.

"Yeah. I–Someone made a site that tracks her location," Toonie said nervously. She tried to pick the Cinderella sticker off her rig.

"All the time?" Jem squinted.

"Well, someone found a hole in one of her aug networks, it's kind of a–"

"Show me."

Toonie flinched but turned her rig around. In addition to the Cinderella wallpaper, the screen showed a pink blinking dot over a map. It was moving north.

Jem's stomach twisted. "How do you know that's her?"

She hesitated, then pointed at the bar on the map. "Because the dot was just here. I-I didn't know until–" She got quiet when Jem stood up.

"I love you fucking perverts. Where's she headed?" Jem asked, leaning over her shoulder. She winced but let her surf.

"Here–these are all the possible routes."

She pointed to a spiderweb of roads, asphalt and air, that looped endlessly through the city.

Jem noticed the pink dot had already passed the Skyview 26, so that was one less option.

"She's going north." Her mind raced. "Does anyone have a car?"

"You're not gonna catch up to her," someone said. "Not grounded."

"Shut the fuck up," Jem barked.

"Take a skycab," said a patron.

"They're on strike 'til next week," someone corrected.

"Then a skybus, fucker," they retorted.

"She'd never make it in time."

Jem wished Kasey was still around to give her a lift. Always was.

"I got a truck," gurgled another voice.

Gabby turned his stool to face her, drink in hand, neck tube bubbling.

"Hovertruck," he added. "Waste hauler…Catch."

He tossed a keychain and she caught it with her broken hand. It had a Morikawa logo on it.

"It's got an assistant but no auto-park, so it's all you. In the lot," he said.

"Fuck yeah, bigs. I'll bring it back spotless."

"Don't," he gurgled. "I plan on dyin' tonight." Some people clapped for him.

Jem looked into his eyes and saw nothing, but she nodded. "I'll bring it back anyway."

She took one last glance at the Cinderella tracker.

"You can open this on your phone," said Toonie.

"I only have a hardline. And it's at home," replied Jem.

Toonie bit her lip and then held the wireless rig. "If I let you borrow this, can she sign it?"

Jem smiled, teeth stained red. "Bigs, I'm sure she'll want to meet you herself."

"Then take it," said Toonie, handing it over.

This was going way too smoothly. Jem was ready to bolt out the door but tried to look grateful.

"Damn, y'all south-siders got hearts after all," she said.

"Just get her back for us," said one of the regulars.

She resisted rolling her eyes. "I will."

"And don't die," said someone else.

"Won't yet," said Jem, hand on the doorknob. "Too pissed."

She slammed it shut behind her.

An half-inch thick layer of gray slime clung to the once-silver exterior. Black grease leaked from the trash compactor onto the street. Jem's boot slipped on the greasy side step but she pulled herself up by the blackened handle and stepped inside. It was beige, boxy, and smelled of stale fusion food. The windshield had a hairline crack and the steering wheel split at the seams. She touched the keychain to the dashboard and the truck booted up with a kick. She put the map on the passenger's side and looked over the controls. Clunky, crude, and inefficient. Nothing like the slicks she flew in combat–no gravpull, no AO toggle, no punch-trigger–just a dumb slab of metal designed to go forward, back, and occasionally up.

She ascended slowly, aligning with the virtual markers that appeared on the windshield. Just as she reached altitude, the speakers chimed. A corporate jingle. The corner of the windshield displayed a hologram of a spinning Morikawa logo that transformed into a floating head with a yellow hardhat. The face was bright white with cartoonishly big eyes.

"Good morning, Gabriel H. It is 12:26am. Please recite your driver PIN to select your route."

Jem looked at the keychain, touching a faded sticker with unreadable numbers. Maybe a one or a seven.

"Fuck," said Jem as she began hovering into place. It felt weighty, unbalanced, and way too slow. Of course that dude forgot.

"Please refrain from using that type of language while on duty, it is–"

"I don't have a PIN so shut the fuck up," she interrupted.

The floating head thought for a moment, spinning.

"Please refrain from using that type of language while on duty," it repeated.

Jem punched at the hologram and it spun again. The truck dragged through the air as traffic zoomed past. It was pulling itself over to the side of the airway. This was such a bad idea already.

"I can tell you're stressed. Should I schedule a mental wellness check with your supervisor?"

"Drive!" she yelled, slamming her foot on the pedal repeatedly.

"A route must be selected before engaging in cruising speed. Please recite your driver PIN."

Jem thrashed the steering wheel wildly but little motion made it to the truck. It swayed gently and stopped as it reached the shoulder. She took a deep breath.

"One-two-three-four-five," she shouted, waiting for a response.

"Invalid pin. Please recite your driver PIN."

"No PIN, no route, just fucking move!" she shouted again.

The head spun. "That is not possible. Unless it is an emergency then–"

"It's a fucking emergency!" Her eyes flicked to the pink dot that continued north.

"It sounds like there is an emergency. Would you like me to alert IMPOL for–"

Jem screamed and laid into the horn.

"Alerting IMPOL to your location," it said. A red and blue beacon popped on top of the hardhat.

"Don't you fucking dare."

"Please refrain from using that type of language while on duty. It is imperative that all Morikawa employees…"

She tried the door but it wouldn't budge. She felt around for a window control but they couldn't be lowered, perfectly sealed to prevent the trash odor from leaking in.

"Unlock the door," she said to the assistant.

"The doors cannot be unlocked while in flight."

Jem stopped thinking and started kicking. First the door, then the windshield. The small crack splintered. She kept kicking until the whole thing came off in one plasticky, shattered piece. Smog billowed in, quickly filling her lungs. She turned on the hazard lights and crawled out on top of the hood. The truck tilted under her weight, she gripped the side mirror.

Cars zoomed past. She waved her arms, hoping someone would stop.

Someone slowed down enough for her to shout at them.

"Can you give me a ride? I need to follow–"

"Call IMPOL," they yelled through the wind, driving past.

"Fu–" she coughed, her throat burning to the fumes.

Red and blue lights blinked in the distance.

She crawled back into the truck and dug through the glove compartment.

"Exterior damage detected. Please report to the nearest Morikawa depot," said the voice.

Registration cards, manuals, maps, and then–a junkyard grade plasma-torch. Rusted, grimy, and roughly pistol-shaped. Bits of old slag flakes stuck to her palm. She tucked it into the small of her back under her belt.

She climbed through the windshield again and clung to the side of the truck, her right hand bloody and useless. The stitches in her shoulder opened back up. Her boot slipped again on the side step but she kept a steady breath, fuzzy-headed from the poisonous air.

She inched her way toward the back of the truck. Sirens approached. The trash compactor was squeezed shut, but black grease oozed out, dripping slowly. She wrapped her elbow around the back handle, steadying herself as she pulled the torch free.

She clicked the trigger. Nothing.

Again.

She cursed at the top of her lungs.

Click-click.

A weak blue tongue flickered at the nozzle, then–*fssh*–the flame danced to life, ugly and stuttering. It licked at the grease for half a second–then the whole back end erupted. A concussive wave of heat slammed her in the face, smoke vomiting out from the compactor vents, orange flames clawing at the sky. She tucked the torch away, wincing, sweating. The pole between her elbow grew hotter.

Cars slowed down to watch the scene. Her eyes burned and her lungs protested.

She locked eyes with a driver. A young woman with olive skin and jet-black hair. They pulled up next to her. A little girl in the backseat.

This was her ride. Had to be.

Jem coughed. "Please help, I gotta get away–" she shouted. She could almost make out the IMPOL emblem on the two cruisers that approached.

Flames illuminated the woman's face as she reached over to the passenger door and pushed it open. It hovered eight feet away from the truck. The woman looked at Jem with wide eyes, saying nothing, just nodding.

"Okay…" Jem gasped. She blinked away melting bits of garbage from her eyes and found shaky footing on the truck's

slick side step. She'd done this before–leaping from her slick into Kasey's, unbuckling him, throwing him over her shoulder, then jumping back. But that was only six feet.

Wind howled against the door, but the woman kept it open. Traffic crawled around them and people began to honk.

Jem swallowed hard, wishing she hadn't. Her insides were on fire.

IMPOL weaved slowly through traffic, inching closer, sirens blaring. The woman noticed and let go of the door, but didn't close it.

Then the wind picked up.

Fuck it.

Jem kicked off the truck and leapt into the air.

She reached–missed. Her stomach plummeted. Then fingers snatched her wrist. The woman, her seat belt anchoring her in place.

The door slammed shut on her right arm–white-hot pain exploded up shoulder. She nearly lost her grip, breath coming out in a choked yell. But the woman didn't let go. Jem's legs flailed, but she pulled herself up, finally getting one knee inside. The door groaned. One more pull. She threw herself in and the door latched behind her.

IMPOL stopped behind the burning truck and Jem could see an outline of the officer's face through the dark window. Maybe they hadn't seen her, she lied to herself. But the woman wasn't driving. She had her arms crossed, watching and waiting for IMPOL to notice.

"You gonna drive?" asked Jem.

The woman looked at her quietly. She had a navy blue suit and an orange blouse. The inside of the car was new, sleek. She had money.

Shit, she didn't want to do this. She touched the torch in her belt. Hesitated. Then pulled it out and pressed it against the woman's side like a gun. In the dark, it was indistinguishable.

"Drive," she coughed. "Now."

The woman's eyes darted to her daughter in the backseat, panic setting in.

"Please–don't do this," she whispered.

Jem's grip tightened. Her eyes watered, red and burning. "I won't hurt you. Just drive. Now."

The woman's breath shuddered, her fingers hovering over the controls. Then, finally, she took the wheel. The car moved forward.

It only took a moment before Jem realized she didn't know where to go.

The rig. The map.

"Fuck!" she shouted. The woman flinched.

Jem looked back at the truck and saw the fire spreading to the front. One IMPOL cruiser was floating next to it, but the other started crawling forward, lights off. Maybe they really didn't see.

"Just go north," she said. Then she remembered that Toonie said it was a site. "You got a phone?" she asked.

"Y-yes, my daughter has it. Should I–"

Jem looked back to see the little girl playing games on the phone.

"Ask her for it back," she whispered.

The woman glanced at the rearview mirror. "Leya, give mommy her phone back," she said shakily.

Jem shifted in her seat, still holding the torch to the woman, but lowering it out of the little girl's view.

The woman reached her hand back and took the phone. She

hesitated, hand shaking, then gave it to Jem.

"Who are you?" asked Leya.

Jem inhaled, her broken hand struggling to even hold the phone. "My name is Jem," she said, raising the pitch of her voice. "Your mommy just saved my life, are you proud of her?" she asked. She didn't know what she was saying.

Leya smiled. "Good job mommy!"

The woman winced, gripping the wheel tighter. Her knuckles went white.

Jem forced a grin through the ache in her jaw. "Yes, good job mommy."

Her whole right arm was useless–she'd need to use her left. She looked at the woman. Deep, burning breath.

"Listen…I-I'm sorry this is happening," she coughed. "My partner was kidnapped by corpos and it's all kinds of fucked, uh–" her eyes darted to Leya, "–fudged up," she corrected. "You might know her…Cinderella?" It sounded weird coming out of her mouth.

The woman stiffened.

"Cinderella?" squealed a voice from the backseat.

Jem didn't waste a second and turned around quickly.

"Yes! Do you like her?" she asked. Then she noticed her tiny pink shoes, cartoon Cindy smiling up at her.

"I love her!" she answered, kicking her feet and singing off-key.

The woman shifted in her seat.

"Well Princess Cindy is in trouble! The big bad dragon flew her to his castle and she needs us to rescue her!"

Leya gasped. "Oh no! Mommy, we need to stop the dragon!"

The woman blinked. "I-I recognize you," she said quietly, her eyes scanning Jem's dirty face.

Jem tilted her head, cracking her neck.

"From the tabloids," said the woman. "You were her girlfriend."

Jem's swollen jaw tightened.

The woman turned to look at her, her eyes catching Jem's dog tags. "Why are you doing this?"

"I told you," she said, rubbing black sweat off her forehead. "Corpos took her. They're gonna make her join this fu-fudging thing. Like take her mind and put it inside."

"The Sea?" she asked.

"Yeah." Her grip loosened on the torch. "They think they own her. I need to get her back. Before they…"

She trailed off. The woman breathed heavily. Leya sang more of Cindy's songs.

La la love you, don't mean maybe...

Jem furrowed her brows. "We don't have to speed. Just steady, in the direction I say. But I need to use my left hand to look at the map." She held up her mangled right arm. "Please don't try anything," she whispered.

The woman hesitated, then nodded.

Jem pulled the torch back and tucked it between her legs. She clumsily swiped the screen, her left hand shaking, but the site finally loaded. The pink dot was further away but airway 76 could get them closer, if they didn't suddenly change course.

"Stay on this road," she said.

The woman nodded again.

"What's your name, by the way?"

"Hinah."

"Thank you, Hinah. I will give you all my creds when we get there," said Jem.

Hinah eyed the torch between Jem's legs as street lights passed

over them.

Jem looked over the map again. As long as that pink dot was blinking, there was still a chance.

"I still am, by the way," she added, gritting her teeth. "Her girlfriend, I mean."

She looked out the window to a moonless sky. "And I fudging love her."

* * *

The pink dot stopped. They were getting close.

Hinah flew steadily, taking all the turns Jem instructed. Jem tried to sound grateful but she knew this was bad. Leya sang made-up songs about saving the princess and Jem could see the fear and anger in Hinah's eyes. She looked out the window. The sky contained the whole city under its blanket. The only light came from below, from the giant ads. Dead ads looping endlessly for things that no longer existed.

They approached Ol' Neptuna Tower, a brutalist monolith along the coast that had seized control of the city's water supply after the dissolution. All drinkable water flowed through its pipes first.

She looked at the map again. The pink dot was right here.

"This must be it," said Jem, biting her lip. "But there's no way we can land on the roof."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Hinah nervously.

"Just drop me off street level, and then you're done with me."

Hinah merged onto an off-ramp and lowered them down onto the street. She pulled up on the front entrance side of the building.

"You guys are heroes." said Jem, lips red with blood. "Thanks

for the help. The rest is on me."

She turned back to Leya. "We made it to the castle! I'll be sure to tell the princess how brave you were and how you helped me rescue her."

Leya squirmed around. "Slay the dragon too!" she shouted.

"I will!" said Jem as she grabbed the torch from her legs and clicked the door open. She turned to Hinah before getting out. "Sorry about this. I owe you big time and I promise I'll pay you."

Hinah just nodded, hands still on the steering wheel.

Jem's knees cracked as she stepped out of the car.

"My phone," muttered Hinah.

Jem realized it was still in her hand. "Oh shit, sorry. I swear I wasn't trying to steal it."

She leaned back into the car and stuck her arm out. Their eyes met one more time.

"Make this worth it, yeah? Get her out of there," whispered Hinah.

"I will," nodded Jem.

Hinah took the phone.

"Good. Then the ride was free," she said, reaching over and pulling the door closed.

The car hovered quickly back into the airway and floated north. The hot ocean breeze reached Jem's nose quickly, carrying with it the same disgusting smell as the pier. It stung her eyes. As soon as she took a step toward the building, tires shrieked behind her. She turned around to see a beat-up yellow car ground to a halt.

10

"Let's do it this morning then. No point in waiting," said Michael. "Yes, it's all been prepped."

The seat squeaked as he moved, probably talking with his hands. Her eyes still didn't work.

"Of course. But it's not a setback, just a hiccup. Nothing changes."

His voice was cold. Cindy imagined his smooth lips running expressionless across his face.

The man to her left was breathing heavily. He would wince occasionally with a pained sigh and she could hear his hand press against his pants. She wondered if he had Michael's stupid tie wrapped around his leg to stop the bleeding. He had his other hand locked around her arm.

The man to her right had one hand on her shoulder, another on her elbow. It was loose, his grip broken, like she could slip away at any second. But she had nowhere to go.

The hovercar descended, vibrationless and silent.

"Yes, we'll be there soon," said Michael. "Alright." His phone clicked.

She could hear him shift in his seat, probably looking back at her.

"We'll be landing soon, Cindy. How are you feeling?" he said.

"Not very good, Michael," she replied.

"Well," he clicked his tongue. "You'll feel better soon."

He shifted forward again. The hovercar continued to drop until it gently bounced against the ground, motionless.

The front doors clicked open with movement. Then the back door opened on her right. The man tightened his grip on her elbow and pulled her out.

"Careful," Michael said.

Her shoes clicked on the floor and her knees whirred quietly as she stood up.

They started walking forward. The other man was no longer next to her, his footsteps trailed behind.

She wondered why there weren't guards all over her. She could break free if she tried. Maybe they didn't think she would. She felt wind blowing against her. She waited for a strong gust. Nothing came.

The sound of the footsteps changed, getting more echoey. They were approaching the entrance.

This wasn't a chance, but she took it.

She synced up her footsteps with the man next to her, brushing against his hip to feel where his leg was.

Left. Right. Left.

Then she extended her heel and plunged it through his foot, crushing bone and squelching flesh. He let go with a scream. She flipped around and ran in the opposite direction.

"Help!" she yelled at the top of her lungs.

"Help me! Hel–" And suddenly she was silent.

A strong gust of wind blew into her as she ran.

She thought the words over and over again, but nothing came out.

"There's nowhere to go, doll," Michael shouted. "We're a

thousand feet off the ground, on the top of a building."

She kept running.

"You're getting close to the edge," he shouted again.

She didn't stop.

"We'll just bring you back. Put you together again. Piece by piece."

Piece by piece.

It echoed in her head.

The wind died down. Her legs buckled and she fell hard onto her knees, the concrete halting her momentum. She slid and stopped, searing pain shooting up her legs. Footsteps came behind her.

"I don't fault you for running away. Change can be scary. But we've practiced this together. It'll be just like the tests."

Her knees were chewed up like a plastic dog toy. She rubbed her fingers together but felt no blood. Not like childhood accidents.

"Here," he said. Something clicked in his hand. Her vision came back.

The edge–inches away from her. A thousand foot drop into nothing but asphalt and sludge. The sound of the city rumbled below.

He clicked another button.

"And now?" he asked.

"Better," she lied.

* * *

A dull static buzzed through her bones–every aug port connected by long cables, bundled together neatly into the machine. Her temples, her elbows, each of her fingers–ports she'd never

seen–a constant stream of electrical impulses. Each wire was paired with a different light on the machine. She'd look to the left and see five yellow dots flicker in sequence. The twitch of her pinky was blue.

She felt like she was sleepwalking; her head asleep but legs still moving toward somewhere she'd never been–somewhere she didn't want to go. She tried to fight Michael the whole way here, but he overrode every attempt.

Electrodes clung to her chest and faintly beeped in sync with her vitals. IV tubes dripped in and out of her bioport, cold, then burning. Her wrists were bound to the arms of the chair–ankles too. She breathed shakily, watching the lightshow. It felt like she was saying goodbye to all of the things she'd never get to do again. And all of the things she never got to do. It was a hollow feeling from somewhere under her ribs.

"Any questions before we begin?" asked Michael.

She didn't speak. Just looked around again for a way out. Nothing.

"Good. Let's begin."

The lights dimmed. Her conductive bones buzzed louder and her tongue became static.

"Calibrating," said Michael.

The red line again. She refused to follow it. The machine beeped.

"C'mon, don't make this difficult. You want this to work, right?"

"I want to go home," she said, voice muffled like underwater.

"We've reconstructed your home for you. You'll see it soon, don't worry."

Electric thrums ran through her muscles, tightening, easing them, then tightening again.

"And soon everyone will join you. You'll put on a show, and they'll all come. They'll all love you, just like they do now. It'll be just what you need."

She only needed one person to love her.

"Believe me, doll, if this wasn't set up already–if we hadn't put so much time and work into preparing you, I'd pull you out right now and find someone else. But…" He rubbed his hands together.

The red line. She looked away.

"This calibration is only to protect you. If you're going to be *unreasonable*, we can skip it altogether. But you will find your experience to be rather unpleasant."

She did everything she could to avoid the red line, the static growing bitter on her tongue.

Michael sighed and walked over to the terminals.

"Very well. Start the transfer," he said to one of the technicians. He ran a thumb nervously across his bottom lip, arms folded across his chest.

The technician tapped a screen and moved diagrams around. Then she typed something, the keyboard clicking noisily. "Transfer initializing. Establishing neural handshake," she said, face inches from the screen.

"And?" said Michael, impatiently.

"Primary node engaged. First transfer phase underway," she answered, leaning back in her seat.

"So we're good?"

"Neural lattice synchronization at seventy-two percent. We're looking good."

Michael sighed and smiled. "Then bring the cameras in."

An assistant opened the elevator doors to dozens of cameras, some on tripods, some around journalist's necks. He looked

for Sandra but didn't see her.

"Welcome," said Michael, forcing a smile. "Make yourselves comfortable. This may take a while."

* * *

The whale's heartbeat thumped with dissonant whispers of bitter static. Thoughts frayed and shattered. Images and words splintered beyond repair. No divide between where she ended and the blue began. She was a pool, slowly being emptied, whirling away. There was nothing else. Nothing to be had or held.

Occasionally, something strong would swim through her–the desire to twitch her finger, to see the lights, but she could only let it pass. The one swirling through now was heavy. A string of characters read one by one. She tried to focus on it.

Wood grain and damp glue. Sawdust dancing in the sun.

Fragile fingers gripped a thin oak board, pushing forward. A round blade whirred.

"That's right," said a voice.

The board split into two halves of equal length.

"One more time," it said.

The board's split again. Her fingers were sticky.

"Now hold them steady."

Right angles. A drill pulled the pieces together, glue dripping down the side.

"Voila-a-a-a!" echoed the voice. "Very good."

It was a picture frame. Crude. Crooked.

"What are you going to hang in it?"

Then another voice, faint, muffled, little.

"I don't know yet," it said.

Then bigger hands took hers. "Well, I'll keep it here for you until you do. It's time for class."

"Okay. Thanks, Ms. Beach."

Sticky fingers slipped on shoes and rushed over to dance class.

The memory sank into darkness.

Others came and went. Some pleasant, some not.

Her handlers. Old friends. Producers. Fans. Surgeries.

The smell of burning hair. Burning plastic.

Starvation. Isolation.

Then Jem. Of course.

But she looked different, younger.

She had messy brown hair and tired eyes. It was the year she was discharged. The year the military dissolved. She couldn't find a job. Nothing other than hired muscle for corpos, or IMPOL…and even that was unreliable. They had been arguing, probably about her augmentations again.

"But why, Cin? Just fucking why?" asked Jem, arms extended under the air conditioner above the front door, drenched in sweat.

"Why do you always have to question it? You can't just trust me?" retorted Cindy. She was on the floor, her stomach stretched across a fuzzy pink carpet, elbows out, head in her hands, back toward Jem. One of her specialists knelt beside her.

"Because I don't understand and I want to," Jem said, talking with her hands.

They shouted at each other across the room, their eyes never meeting.

Cindy splayed her fingers and shrugged her shoulders. "It's what's in style. Why is that so cryptic to you?"

"Removing your whole fucking leg is in style? Are you kidding?" She stepped closer.

"It'll help me perform better."

The specialist rotated Cindy's steel femur until it clicked into place. Then she fit pieces of silicone thighs together until they locked into each other, hiding any seams. The contract said no visible seams. Jem looked away.

"Especially with dancing," Cindy added.

"For who? Half of the population is gone. Who's left to dance for?"

"You," she said, smiling.

"But Cin," she hunched and held her hands to her chest. "I already love you. Everyone does. There's no one else to impress. Why–"

Cindy cut her off. "Because I don't want to melt like everyone else. Is that what you want to hear?"

She rolled over on her back and the specialist pulled their hands back.

"Miss…"

"There's one-hundred-billion pounds of liquified corpses flooding the oceans. That's not normal, Jem. You think that's normal?"

"I didn't say–"

"It's not. And I just want to have some kind of normalcy in my life. I just want something safe and reliable. And sturdy."

Cindy stood up.

"Miss–please."

Cindy continued, pacing toward Jem. "And I want to be able to trust myself. Trust that my insides won't spill over and fry on the sidewalk like an egg. Is that too much to–"

Her leg came apart and she fell into Jem's arms, the metal

bones clattering on the ground.

Jem tried to hold her but she pushed herself away onto one leg. The specialist gingerly picked up the pieces.

"Can you try to understand that?" asked Cindy, ready for another wave of shouting. But Jem already had tears in her eyes. She wanted to stop herself but kept pushing. "Why am I so important to you anyway?"

She laughed, but it cracked in her throat. "I'm not who you first met. I'm not who you dated. I don't even know what parts are still mine, or her's–what's left of her."

She pointed at her leg, then her chest. "It's all fake–all noise. You keep holding on like I'm something solid, but I'm not. I'm scaffolding. I'm barely here."

She turned away. "And I'll fall right through your fingers."

A siren whirred outside. Cindy swallowed hard. Her chest tightened.

"So just…let me go. Please. You're allowed to."

But that's not what she wanted. Not at all. She turned around to hold her, to fall into her arms again, but she wasn't there. All that remained was her presence, her gravity.

Even that shredded away slowly, bit by bit.

One word lingered. An airy, warm, perfect voice feeding back on itself until it almost sounded like nothing.

Dive.

Dive.Dive.Dive.Dive.

The words repeated, bouncing off each other, taking form, building shapes.

Pillars of static rose from the blue. Huge, towering pillars, spilling out crushed bits of half-digested data, see-through but unavoidable–there was nowhere else to look.

The pillars slowly drained, the top solidifying downwards, glossy and marble. The only ethereal clue left was the painful chromatic aberration, but even that began to sync together. The presence was overwhelmingly felt, taking up space, gaining mass.

And then a bubble. A small, delicate bubble.

Cindy, from whatever omniscient perspective she had, looked at the bubble and saw herself reflected.

She tried to touch it but had nothing to touch with, so instead, it just moved, floating inches to the right.

Everything was below her, in an ever expanding ocean of blue. There was nothing else she could do.

She dove.

She might've wanted to get out of here. She might've begged. She might've screamed. She might've realized what was happening sooner. She might've stopped herself from ever agreeing to this. She might've done a lot of things, but she didn't. She didn't even notice these thoughts had come and gone like the last waves of an evaporating ocean.

11

There was a place in the buried west. A cave with a house in it. In the house, on the clay wall, the holes of hands. From the rafters, silver spoons dangled by hempen twine, blowing in the gentle breeze. Clattering.

This is where The Monkey was born. Where he placed his hand in hand. The hand that fit–so they say. He was to be the last saint. The one who could bless and forgive before the end.

Pilgrimages were made through battlefields and disasters to find him. He carried silver spoons and the pilgrims carried him. Back to the city they went. The city reborn as Silver. The city of spoons.

Everyone wanted to see him. But he could only be seen through rust and blood. Through hollowed out bone and arcing wires. And those that saw him would be gifted a most simple gift.

A way out.

West gasped awake, nearly suffocating under the covers. He was drenched in sweat, sheets soaked through. He threw the covers off and felt sunlight pierce through his closed eyelids. He sat up and rubbed them, worried he'd break them like egg

yolks. He stepped off the bed and fell to his knees.

Something wasn't working. He wiggled his toes but felt nothing. Maybe he was still dreaming.

He opened his eyes to a pink carpet, clean, itchy on his palms. Then a nightstand and beige wallpaper. A hotel.

He couldn't feel the floor against his legs. They moved fine as he sat up, just numb.

He heard noise from the bathroom. And music.

He ran fingers down his side, losing feeling at his ribs. Then he felt the bandage wrapped tightly around his waist, slightly discolored on the left.

Another noise. *La La Love You.*

He lifted himself up and felt like he was floating in the air. He tried to step forward but tripped, catching himself on the nightstand, his hand bumping into something cold. He blinked the sleep from his eyes and picked it up. A pistol. Heavy. It felt wrong in his hands but he tightened his grip.

He looked toward the bathroom. The door was cracked open

He moved closer, balancing himself.

The shower turned on with a hiss.

He took another step forward.

"Is someone in there?" he said into the bathroom.

As he approached he saw a figure through the frosted glass.

"Yo! Who's in there?" he shouted louder.

A yelp, then a laugh. "You scared the shit outta me!" echoed a feminine voice from the shower. "You're up early."

"Who are you?" asked West, fingers still gripping the gun.

"Still me, baby. Doctor Lusia. You feelin' okay?" she asked.

He must've slipped hard. This wasn't gonna be good.

"Shit," West said as he lowered the gun. He head swam, painlessly, for once.

The shower door slid open. A bald head and a flawless face emerged. Bright green eyes smiled at him.

"Oh, you poor thing. Come in here," she said, waving her hand.

He stepped into the bathroom and rested the gun on the faux-marble counter.

"I, uh, I don't know what's goin' on," he sighed.

"That's okay. We'll take it slow" she said. "Hop in with me, let me take care of you."

Her voice was familiar. Soothing, in a way. But he couldn't place her face.

She held her hand out, waiting for him to take it.

"I'm okay," he said.

"No you ain't, baby. Look at you, bleedin' up my bandages. C'mon."

Fuck it. If this was a dream, might as well enjoy it. He stepped into the shower with her.

Water beaded on her bronze skin. She carefully unraveled the bandage around his waist and revealed a swollen red cut with nano-stitches holding it together.

"Lookin' better, baby," she said, splashing some water on it.

Then she squeezed some soap in her hands and lathered them up. She touched his side gently and cleaned the wound. It didn't hurt. He couldn't feel it or the water dripping down his legs.

Her smile was friendly, warm. There were dozens of little circles on her face, dark metal rings. And her whole body was segmented with mod lines.

Then he saw it. The tattoo. No. 13. His heart raced.

"Anda?" he asked.

"Yes, baby?"

"What the fuck happened?"

She smiled calmly. "Guess you don't remember, huh?"

He shook his head, slightly dizzy.

"You got surgery and you're recovering. Been high on pain meds, probably confusin' you."

He touched his side. The hot air was getting hard to breathe. "What surgery?"

Anda hesitated, just for a second. "Something with your kidney," she answered. "They didn't explain it to me."

His stomach tensed. "They?"

"Mr. Grieves and his associates." She looked at him concerned. "Nothin'?"

He shook his head again, stepping out of the shower. As his wet foot hit the ground, he slipped and fell face first onto the tile. Hot pain shot through his nose and elbow.

Bubbles brushing past his skin. He felt smaller, simpler.

Surface tension broke as his head emerged, warm water running down his cheeks. Two wrinkled faces smiled at him. The air was thick, the lights were foggy. Cherry blossoms swayed in the hot breeze.

Then wet flesh splattered against his face in slow motion.

The drill spun in the half-inch skull-hole and he couldn't stop staring. There was something different about the face through all the blood. The blood revealed something. He kept squinting, trying to make sense of it, but shards of bone impaled his eyes. He blinked and rolled over to a bright, steamy bathroom.

He didn't realize he was screaming.

Anda yelped and hopped out of the shower. Her feet had rubber grips on the bottom.

"Oh, no! I am doing such a bad job. I'm sorry," she said, bending down and picking him up.

"Don't touch me!" he shouted, pushing her away. He fell back

to the floor in a puddle.

"Baby…" she said quietly.

What the fuck just happened?

He sat up, back against the sink cabinet, red eyes darting around for something familiar. He landed on a soft, perfect face staring back at him.

"What did you do to me?" he asked, struggling for air. "What was that?"

"I was just tryna pick you up…" she answered sweetly.

At least her voice was familiar. Nothing else was.

"Your face…" he gestured his hands in all directions in front of him.

She looked down, brows knitted up. He blinked again, eyes still stinging.

"Was that an echo?" he asked. "Could it have been?"

"Was what an echo?"

He tried to catch his breath, but it came out shaky. "Tell me everything." He rubbed his nose. Blood on his fingers. "Please–slowly."

"Sure," she said. "Let's talk while we fix you up."

Anda placed the gun back on the nightstand and flicked the TV on. It filled in the silence.

West sat on the side of the bed and Anda kneeled on the floor. She pulled fresh bandages from a slot on her hip and wrapped them around his waist. Her movements were so precise, so gentle.

"We slipped together at B4BY's. You remember?"

He nodded. She continued.

"You got hungry. They asked me to follow you. We grabbed some snacks, burgers, ice cream. You ate a lot, kept slippin'

more. I wanted to cut you off but they told me to let you. Never seen someone slip that hard. Like you were in slow motion."

As she told the story, fragments of each moment danced behind his eyes. He didn't know if they were real or just imagination. He tried to control his breathing. He was there, in his shop again. He really felt it.

"And then they wanted to meet you. Shook hands, made a deal. Laid you on a bed and you slipped even more–thought you were gonna go backwards," she laughed. "Somethin' about your kidney. It was a good kidney, like one someone wanted. Cause you're tame–not all gunked up from augs. You were cool with it, so they took it out. Asked me to take care of you." She checked his elbow for bruising. "And you know me, baby. Been here all night."

West felt like throwing up. He clutched his stomach and tried to tell if there was a lack of kidney inside him. He couldn't feel anything. But the story made sense, and that was the worst part. Slippin' and falling into shit. Sounded like him. His nose ached.

"Who are they?" he groaned. "The fuckin' kidney stealers."

"I only knew Mr. Grieves and his employee, Vosk."

Shit. Was he really missing a kidney because of Vosk, of all people?

"And you're a doctor? Thought you were just a doll," he muttered.

"I'm whatever they tell me to be, baby. Right now, it's Doctor Lusia," she smiled. It looked off this time. Uncanny.

"Did they really take my kidney? Can you tell?" he asked, feeling around his torso.

"Oh, baby, they took it. I saw it on ice." Something about her face was too perfect. He realized he couldn't see any pores. Any hairs. Just those metal rings.

This might've just been a nightmare. Maybe he was still slippin'. He pinched himself in the leg but didn't feel it. Then he pinched his arm. A waking nightmare.

"Anda…Are you real?"

"Watchu mean, baby?" she said, wiping the blood off his nose.

There was something about her voice too. Too perfectly pitched. Tight.

"You're not a person. You're some kind of intelligence?"

"Oh, yeah. It's not obvious?"

"I just never met one of you before. Didn't know what to expect."

She smiled, leaning closer between his knees. "Well, do you like what you see?"

"Very convincing," he said, pulling away from her. "What happened to all the wires?"

"They're still here," she said, tucking her fingers under her jaw. The holes on her face flipped open and revealed jacks and needles that could be pulled out, spooled up behind her face.

West could see the do0m tube glistening, among other utilities.

"You ain't tryna' slip, right?" she asked.

West shuddered. "No, no."

"Good," she said. "I'm sure they'll pay you."

They're not gonna pay him. His eyes flicked to the pistol on the nightstand. "And the gun?"

"Hmm? That's yours, baby. You were real worried about IMPOL, went and bought it from a pawn shop."

Fuck…IMPOL? Was he worried they found out about Robbie? Or the INform datastream?

Then something on the TV caught his attention. A reporter was taking into the camera, behind them were rows and rows of

computers. They mentioned the impossible amount of data the room could hold, and Ol' Neptuna's unprecedented compact storage system. The camera panned over to Cinderella who sat motionlessly in a soft reclining chair. She was connected to a mess of wires and scientists looked over her and at monitors. She looked like a corpse behind it all. Probably drugged up. What were they going to take? The reporter said she was in the process of being the first to join The Sea. Humanity's paradise.

"Who's Toons, by the way?" asked Anda.

"Huh?"

"Her name, you mentioned her a lot. Said she'd be mad that you were slippin'."

He wondered what else he talked about in the haze.

"It's Toonie, he said. An old friend. Business partner."

"Well you tried to call her. I didn't let you."

He almost laughed. No way.

"You'd better call her now if you're that worried."

He blinked. "I'm not."

"You were. And The Monkey?"

West shivered. The face through the blood. Is that what he saw? "What about him?" he asked.

"That's what I'm askin' you."

"What did I say about him?"

"Nothin', only said his name a bunch. It's okay, baby, just relax now."

West's gut twisted itself in knots. What the fuck was going on?

Something was definitely missing, in more ways than one. He could feel it inside him, the abscess. They took it and he let it happen. He was so gone that he let it happen. His hands started shaking.

He let so much shit happen.

He slammed his fist against his side, punching at the bandages.

Just dull pressure.

Then he punched it again. And again. His stitches tore. Red soaked through the white fabric.

He hit harder. Anda tried to stop him but he kicked her away.

He tore off the bandage and dug his fingers into the wound, gouging away.

Then her hand locked around wrist like a vice, lifting his arm into the air. He stopped kicking.

The one time he wanted to feel it. The one time he wanted to fucking feel it and he couldn't. He deserved to feel it. He wanted to feel it all. He was sick of numbing himself. Sick of missing shit.

He let so much shit happen. He let everyone take things. Too many things. Just waltz in and out. Grab a kidney and leave. And he fucking let them. What a fucking idiot. A disappointment. To his friends–the few he had left. And the ones who were gone.

To his parents. His brother. His grandparents. Himself.

A useless fucking loop, playing on repeat.

He knew this feeling. He'd been here before. And that made it worse. Because how many times?

The fucking cycle. He debased augs, he got high, he broke stuff. And something was always missing. How many times? What is he supposed to do? Ignore the end completely? That's all he ever did. He'd just keep on debasing things. But this thing wasn't a rig. Wasn't an aug. It was him. And whatever he had left. He couldn't fix it.

He couldn't fix it. But he could fix something.

Something swelled within him.

He picked up the hotel hardline. His finger hovered over the call button. Then he pressed it, painting it with blood. It rang.

"Yo, bigs."

She actually answered. His breath hitched–he didn't know he'd been holding it.

"Toonie, I–"

He swallowed hard. He shouldn't say it.

"Toonie…I love you."

The line crackled with static. "Love you too, bigs."

"No, really. I'm thinking clearly. And I think I love you."

She laughed, but it sounded more annoyed than giddy.

He continued. "I do. I have, for like, forever. Since we were kids. It's always been there."

Her laugh turned into a sigh. "You disappeared. You good?"

His ears were getting hot. He'd never been more nervous. "I'm fucked up."

"What else is new?" she muttered.

"Are *you* good?" he returned.

"Kind of busy right now."

"Doing what?"

"It's embarrassing."

"Can't be worse than what I just said."

"Well," she sighed, "I'm with that green-haired girl. We're gonna help Cinderella."

West closed his eyes and moved the phone away from his ear. He took a deep breath and held it. Felt the sun on his back. Felt the warmth of his ears. Felt the phone in his hand. The texture, the weight. The way the air sat in his lungs. He held it a little longer, then let go.

"Can I help?" he asked.

She was silent for a moment. "You want to?"

"Yeah. Yes," he said with resolve.

"Okay, but you'll have to come to us."

Then it came back. The smirk. His first real one in a long time.

"Where are you?"

He winced at the answer, then hung up and turned to Anda. He already regretted every decision he made in the last few minutes.

"Get dressed. We're leaving."

"No we're not, you're bleeding!" she said, hands on her hips.

"I'll be fine," he stepped off the bed and managed to stand in place. "See?"

"No way, baby. We're staying here." She stood up next to him.

"I'll go without you then," he said, struggling to put his pants on.

"I can't let you leave," she said, her tone different.

"You're gonna try to stop me? They program that into you?"

Her face was blank for a second, loading. "I don't want to, but I will grab your wrist if you step past me and hold you here. Sorry, baby."

"I don't want to either, but what if I threaten you?" he asked, putting on his shirt and jacket, eyeing the gun.

"Unfortunately, I can't feel threatened. I want you to get out of here–I really do–but I can't let you," she said, her face looking genuinely concerned.

West grabbed the gun and pointed it at her feet. It was heavy and his hand was shaky.

"I'm going to walk past you now. Don't grab me or I'll shoot."

He waited. She didn't even blink. Then he took a step forward.

There was only about three feet on either side of her, no way to get out of her reach. She watched him closely. He put his back against the wall and side-stepped toward the door.

"Baby, don't do this," she said, green eyes looking into his.

He crossed the threshold. Her hand came down on his wrist like cuffs. He jerked away instinctively but it had no effect. She gently but forcefully pulled him back to the other side of the room. His numb legs buckled and he fell to his knees.

She yelped and knelt over him. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to–"

"It's okay. It was my fault," he said, resting his back on the side of the bed.

She was like him, in some ways. Doomed to do something she didn't want to do. Cinderella too. She was like a lot of people. Maybe everyone. But at least now he understood.

"What can and can't you do? With me, I mean," he asked, hand on his chin.

"It's not that simple," she began.

"But if it was," he cut her off. "Pretend like it's like you were given rules."

"Then there would only be one thing," she said, thinking. "I was told specifically to take care of you."

"How so?" he asked.

"They just said the words, 'take care of him' before leaving you, so I stitched you up and took you here."

A shiver ran down his spine. Then another.

"And you understood that as…watch over me until I'm healed up?" he swallowed.

"That's right. Make sure you don't do anything dangerous."

"How do you know what's dangerous?"

"I don't. I just have to make educated guesses, like anyone

else. Just doing what they told me, that's the number one thing."

"Can you help me find a loophole?"

She shook her head. "I can't," her voice softened. "Sorry, baby."

He sighed, then felt something spark in his head. "Can you come here then?" He gestured to his lap.

She crawled over with a smile and rested her head on his numb legs. She stitched up his wound without looking and wrapped him in a fresh bandage. He looked over her face and ran his fingers along the metal rings that covered the various wires.

"Do you have a cable in there that hooks up to a TV?" he asked, trying to keep a poker face.

"Of course," she said, touching under her jaw. "For diagnostics and visual playback."

A latch unclicked. The holes opened and wires poked through, ready to be pulled. It was an uncomfortable sight and stirred something within him. She grabbed a TV cable and pulled it out, holding the output jack in her fingers. His eyes lingered on the do0m tube for a moment before he shook his head.

"Now go plug it in, please." He started seeing her for what she was–an illusion. "What do you know about me?" he asked as she began setting up the TV.

"Simple answer? I know your name is West, you're addicted to do0m, you're recovering from surgery. But I'd love to learn more, baby."

"You know I love television, uh, streaming? Television broadcasts?" He didn't even know what to call it. Never owned one.

She plugged in her cable and a playback menu appeared on TV. "Oh, really?" she asked, brows furrowed.

"Yeah. My grandparents used to run a TV repair shop. Taught me everything they know." He moved closer to the TV and she kneeled down beside it. "How do we do visual playback?"

"Oh, I see. Last night, huh? You sure?"

"Yeah, I have to."

"I'll start from the beginning then," she said as the screen flickered and displayed his face sitting alone in the green room. It was from her point of view and she was approaching.

He really didn't wanna watch all this, but he sat in silence. It showed him again, high, too high to sleep with her despite her attempts, just laying there staring at the ceiling. Then they got snacks, burgers, ice cream, and bought the gun from a pawn shop, just like she said. But now was his chance, in the corner store.

"Why does the video look so dull?" he said, stepping toward the TV. He pointed at the refrigerators and colorful snacks on the shelves.

"Whatchu mean, baby?"

"The color is all wrong." He pressed his fingers blindly through the TV menus, pretending like there weren't enough settings to adjust the image. "And the TV is so shit, it can't be adjusted. Sometimes these things are on the playback device's end," he said, looking at her confused face. "Could I tweak the output settings?"

"Why?" she asked, guarded.

"Cause that kind of stuff bothers me. Once you know when the color's off, you can't unsee it."

"You know what you're doing?" she asked, relaxing her shoulders.

Just an illusion.

"Of course, it's a simple tweak of the output meters." He stood

in front of her. “May I? It would make me feel a lot better.”

She processed for a moment, then smiled. “Sure, baby.”

He ran his fingers along her head until he found a latch and pushed it. Her entire face clicked off and he placed it on the bed. This allowed him to access the other latch that undid her scalp. He clicked it off. Underneath the scalp plating, the aug connections looked like tangled roots of steel wool and polymer thread, pulsing faintly with microcurrents. Storage, optic augs, and other parts he’d never seen. But there were neural augs too.

“Dang, I wish I had a screwdriver,” he sighed.

She held up her hand and splayed her fingers, opening them up to various little tools. “Take what you need. Just be careful, baby.”

He looked back inside her head. Her optics whirred softly, programmed to jitter on occasion, to humanize them. Her brain looked like a dozen neural augs linked together by some other mesh network.

He recognized the models from the botched root he did last month. The man came in asking to unlock some thought paths that his job had forced shut. If he hadn’t been slippin’ he would’ve done it too, instead of fucking his face up. His heart sank. If he messed up on this one, her head would fry. Might even kill her. But maybe that was best. What if she found out what Vosk and his boss really asked her to do?

He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly through pursed lips.

He’d do it right. Bypass the warranty failsafes and root them. At least he had a clear head, for now.

“Tell me if the color looks any better,” he said, fingers flicking tools across wires and circuits.

“I don’t see a difference,” she replied.

"Keep looking, I'm going to change the contrast."

The failsafe triggers were woven into a neural mesh, looking like a web of synthetic dendrites. He tapped the interface pins, sending a soft pulse to check for power. They were there and explosive. He swallowed hard and touched the wires.

The moment he shorted the diode, a tiny red LED flickered–a heartbeat away from detonation. He exhaled, forced his fingers steady, and clipped the next wire in sequence, rerouting power to a dummy node. Sweat dripped down his temple. He was glad the shakes hadn't caught up to him yet.

"How about now?" he asked, moving on to the next aug. He was surprised at his success.

"Maybe? Try adjusting the gamma," she replied.

The scent of burning polycarb filled his nose as he desoldered another critical failsafe, the synthetic casing curling back like charred flesh. He made quick work of the others, getting into a flow state, repeating the motions. Eventually they were all bypassed. He breathed a sigh of relief and got to work turning off the actual censors and custom neural locks. He'd only be able to do so much on a hardware level, but it had to be enough. The closer he got to the core processor, the more things started to shift. A small flicker in her voice.

"B-b-baby, you doin' something to my head?" she asked.

"No, just the output," he said. "Why, you feel okay?"

"I feel fine, I just–" she paused. "Why did you want to leave the hotel?" she asked softly.

"My friend. I wanna help her," he said, reaching the core.

"Is she in trouble?" she asked, worry woven into her tuned voice.

"I don't know, but her…*friend* is. And I feel like I should be there for her."

"That's a good r-r-reason," she stuttered.

"But you can't let me leave, right?"

"Right," she said quickly. Then she tilted her head, almost messing him up. "I mean, it's not that I can't."

"Oh? What do you mean?" he asked, flicking the second to last switch.

"I mean, they told me to take care of you. That means I decide what's best for you, right? I don't know why I couldn't also decide other things. Why I can't–"

He flicked the last switch.

"–do what I want."

He exhaled and shook off the tension. "What do you want?" he asked, putting the tools back into her fingers.

She didn't say anything. Didn't move.

He put her scalp back on, then her face. Her smile faded.

"What do you want, Anda?" he asked again, hoping he didn't break her. He reached for the gun and pointed it at her. His heart was racing. She should want to help him.

No reply. The visual playback showed West slowly shaking hands with someone in a dark suit. Their face was pixelated, probably baked into the optics. Then it cut out. The TV went dark.

Her eyebrows twitched, then her eyes looked up at him.

"I–" she said, voice gaining more weight. "I don't know," her face still processing.

West unplugged the wire and it retracted into her face. She knelt there motionless. He slipped a t-shirt around her. Then her face twitched again.

"Are you going to kill me?" he asked, finger on the trigger, ready to run.

"What? Baby, why would I–"

"Then let me leave," he cut in, putting the gun in his coat pocket. He wobbled over to the door.

"No," she said, standing up, putting on shorts. "I can't. Not alone."

After they left, a familiar face smeared across the TV, following them.

12

"It's really a feat of engineering," Michael told the reporter. "We compressed neural latticework down to near-atomic precision by bypassing the limits of conventional theory. Now, each disc holds a neural replica so detailed it's functionally indistinguishable from the real thing." He licked his lips. "Cutting edge."

"Indeed. And if this is successful–" started the reporter.

"It will be," interrupted Michael, smiling.

"If it is," they emphasized, "what would you say to those who are interested in joining?"

Michael looked directly into the lens.

"I would say that you deserve this. You've worked hard. Fought hard. You deserve a rest. A real rest. Kick off your shoes and join us–you'll be glad you did."

"And what is it that users will be experiencing, exactly?"

Michael paused for a moment to gather his thoughts, then smiled again. "To put it simply," his lips parted, "it's paradise. True, unburdened existence. Not a simulation–a *continuation*. A persistent network of consciousness built to last without maintenance."

He crossed his legs and laced his fingers around his knee. "Imagine a garden where nothing wilts. Or a nervous system

without pain. In this world that was thrust upon us, everything has to end. But in The Sea, nothing does. Join us. You don't have to pack any bags, but you can take everything with you."

The reporter took a beat. "That sounds quite revolutionary. Considering the immense public interest and Cinderella's pioneering spirit, how significant is it for The Sea that she will be the inaugural resident of your network?"

Michael finished sipping from a glass and looked into the lens again. Cinderella and technicians were visible behind him. "We're over the moon with Cinderella's collaboration. We couldn't ask for a better candidate. She's currently being uploaded, but once she's settled in, you're all invited to join her. She'll be hosting a party at her castle and performing a very special and exclusive show viewed only from within The Sea. You won't want to miss it." He smiled and softened his voice. "It's not an ending. It's a beginning. Visit us to learn more. We're ready for you."

"Thank you, Michael. We wish you the best of luck and hope to see Cinderella arrive safe and sound."

"It was my pleasure," he smiled. "Hope to see you there."

The next reporter lined up for an interview.

* * *

Her high-heel blades whisper across the stage. Then she feels freedom.

There is so much space to dance around. She does cartwheels. Then she feels joy!

The bubble sways from left to right. Then it grows. Then it shrinks.

There are no microphones or speakers. There is no need.

Then she feels power.

The stage is blue. The stage is purple. The stage is round and square.

The bubble is round. The bubble does not have edges.

There is no audience yet. They will come soon. Then she feels patience.

Her footsteps make no sound, but the concept of sound echoes behind her.

She does not breathe. There's no need. She does not notice this.

She does not blink. She sees Michael, Carlo, Samir, Jem, herself–everyone all at once! It's easy.

Everyone is inside the bubble. The bubble is everyone.

At the same time, she sees Silver, the Dollhouse, Plachard Park, Jem's apartment, the corner of 84th Street, the garden, the ocean–all of her favorite places, in front of her all the time!

She can see things she's never seen, like a giant baby seal with strawberries for eyes, or a birthday cake made of dragon scales. She feels excitement! It is fulfilling. Then she feels content.

The bubble floats. The bubble contains.

Then she feels serenity.

Then she feels impatience.

Her home can be any color. Full of the possessions she adores.

But the rooms are empty. Then she feels emptiness.

The people within the bubble, she is so glad to see them, but they cannot see her. They cannot hear her. They cannot touch her. And she can't touch them. Then she feels loss.

She studies their faces closely, but they lack depth–detail–authenticity. There's something wrong. Ms. Beach's hair is too white. Michael's eyes are too dull. Jem's green hair is too

long. Her chipped tooth is gone. Her smile is crooked. And her jawline is too soft.

Then she feels an emotion for which she has no word for.

* * *

During a break from interviews, Michael stepped into the blue-tiled penthouse bathroom. His eyes avoided his reflection in the smart-mirror as he leaned over the sink, instead focusing on the phone in his hand. His thumb hovered over the call button below Sandra's name. He cracked his knuckles, licked his lips, and checked his watch. The transfer was ahead of schedule and going well. They could start accepting applications this evening–maybe even within the next couple hours. He didn't expect complications, but he knew any number of things could go wrong at any moment. That's why the call button remained unpressed. Would she still be interested if the launch wasn't perfect? Would her fears eclipse her common sense? She'd grown quiet, and his proposal wasn't received how he'd anticipated. Maybe it was premature. It's possible he misjudged the timing. Or maybe she was confused. Maybe she needed clarity. He could explain it to her. Truth has the power to change any course–dispel any darkness. Then she'd understand.

He pressed the call button without letting the thought linger. It rang once. Then twice. Then it went to voicemail.

When it was his turn to speak, he licked his lips again and smoothed his tie.

"Sandra, it's Michael. I'm sure you're occupied with work, so I'll speak plainly."

He paced around the room until his eyes caught his reflection.

Then he turned away and stood still, looking only at his feet.

"I want you to marry me. I know it's the right thing to do. Paradise isn't paradise without you."

He chose his words carefully and spoke slowly and clearly.

"When the end comes, there is no one I would rather spend eternity with than you. Regardless of how we get there, I need you by my side. Will you join me, please? Before time runs out. I feel this…" He held his nose and exhaled, popping his ears. "…pressure," he continued. "Pressure to educate. Pressure to enlighten. Pressure to make the world see reason. And when you're *unreasonable*, the pressure only increases."

He clicked his heels together, then turned around, facing himself directly, staring into his own eyes. Blue, cold, and hard. He tried to see past them but they were impenetrable.

"And like the rest of the world, Sandra…" He blinked, holding his palm up to the mirror, joining his fingers.

"I am approaching maximum pressure."

13

Yuto was still twitching, blinking wildly. Just cold impulses. West covered his face with a checkered towel and sat on the balcony, legs through the rails, waiting for IMPOL to arrive. He knew they wouldn't come, but he pretended anyway. He needed fresh air and his swimming head made him desperate enough to inhale the city. The apartment had been festering in the heat, probably for weeks. Yuto's bloated corpse had fused to his stim-chair and his jacks were still plugged in. He hadn't heard from him since the dissolution. He should've checked on him sooner. He would've, if he hadn't been slipping for days.

His eyes followed an emaciated black cat crawling along the rooftops, clinging to the shadows, desperate for food. Then he turned his head to little Toonie, poking a stick into the weird foam on the beach. The whole city was out, crowding around the foam. Some people were crying, some puking, some throwing themselves in. But Toonie was just laughing, and so was he.

He laughed aloud. A Dead worm stared at him with telescopic eyes. The flex-tubing in his jacket must've burst since he couldn't feel any coolant flow through it. It held some residual chill still, but barely helped. Had he been dreaming? He sat

upright in his seat and tried to be present.

He and Anda rode a skybus to Toonie's location: an abandoned office building on the coast, just across from Ol' Neptuna Tower. It used to be the city's own water treatment headquarters before Ol' Neptuna took over. After that, it was gutted and left to rot. Some corpo tried pitching a repurpose plan, but that fizzled out fast. Then the squatters moved in. It soon became a graveyard.

West and Anda tiptoed through the dark halls, stepping over long-dead bodies. Even out of her element, she still moved like a person. It was hard not to humanize her–hard not to be fooled by every human tick she had, even if they were all just a close-up magic trick.

"You know about echoes?" he asked her.

"What kind?" she asked back.

"The kind someone like me might experience." He kept his sunglasses on even though he could barely see anything.

"I know they're a side effect," she answered. "Why, did you hear one?"

"I saw one. Two. Felt them."

"That ain't good, baby," she took his hand. "I wanted to stop you, but Vosk ask me to–"

"It's okay," he tried to smile, wanting to make sure she knew it wasn't her fault. Then he caught himself. "Don't worry about it." He wasn't a doctor, but he figured it had something to do with his missing kidney. It processed things slower, maybe, and his body must've been filled to the brim with do0m.

There was only one room with a light on, at the end of the third floor hallway. He knocked on the door.

A blurry face peered through the frosted glass. "Who is it?"

He answered.

The green-haired girl opened the door. She looked worse than last time. A makeshift sling cradled her right arm and duct tape covered the bullet hole. *What was her name?*

"Hey, doc. You treat broken bones?"

"Only metal ones," he grinned as he stepped through the door.

Toonie was curled up at a desk, her portable rig plugged into all sorts of cables, face glued to the screen. Why was she really here? This wasn't her vibe.

Anda ducked under the door frame, towering over everyone.

"Oh…" coughed Jem, stepping back.

"Shit, this is An–"

"I'm Anda," she answered, extending her hand.

Jem blinked at West.

"You can shake it," he said. "She's–uh, *it's*…not dangerous."

Jem shook it with her non-bandaged hand and closed the door.

Toonie turned around and pushed up her glasses. "Yo, bigs. Hi…"

"Anda," she waved.

"…Anda." Toonie smiled, her glasses slipping back down her nose.

"Hey, Toons," said West, running fingers through his wild hair. He studied her face for anger but didn't find it. "Anda's supposed to, uh, take care of me."

"That's right, baby," she smiled. She looked even more artificial in the sterile office lighting. "You're Toonie?" she asked. "Heard a lot about you."

"Oh really?" she fake laughed then glanced at West, noticing the blood on his shirt. "You look like shit. You okay?"

"Feel like it too. I'm fine."

He felt like he was lying. He shouldn't be here. Neither should

Anda. This wasn't his crowd. But neither were the bigs at the club and he didn't complain. He shuddered at how sterile this office was. His brother had worked in a place like this. But Toonie was here, and she was here for a reason.

"What's going on?" he asked, sitting on one of the half-melted chairs.

"Cin's across the street," started Jem. "They've plugged all sorts of shit into her and they're…I don't know, mirroring her?"

"Mirroring what?"

Jem pointed at her temple. "Her mind? I don't fudging know. Fuck, fucking."

"Neural replication? That shit's dangerous." He'd heard stories.

"She kept it vague, I found out through the news. It's…a lot."

West noticed the live news feed playing on Toonie's rig. He could see Cinderella sitting in a chair with technicians all around her. A blue progress bar across the bottom read eighty-nine percent.

He didn't wanna scare her, but the last time someone tried something like that, it didn't go well. Like pulling silk from a spider. It was The Monkey, wasn't it?

"She'll be okay," he said coolly.

"Not if we keep jerking each other off in here!" she barked, fighting for composure. "When's this gonna be done?"

No one answered.

She desperately fucking needed her vape. Something to cool her off. But it was at Cindy's hotel. If they didn't get things rolling soon, she was gonna go psycho.

She took a shaky breath. She almost had it, then lost it.

She swung her fist at the drywall and punched a hole through it.

Dust filled the air and crumbs scattered across the floor.

"It's…nice. It's really nice that you're helping me. But this shit is going way too slow." She grabbed the plasma torch from the table. "I'm about to rush in unless we make some fucking progress!" she shouted again, this time toward Toonie.

Toonie turned red, sinking into her chair.

West almost yelled in her defense, but rolled his chair next to her instead. "What do you need?" he asked.

She spoke quietly. "I can't shut down cameras or open doors. Maybe once we're inside, but not from here. The only way we can get in is through the front entrance. Cinderella's in the penthouse."

They couldn't just walk in.

"How do we get up there?" asked Jem.

"There's scheduled press events all day. Reporters can enter the penthouse during their time slot, to take pictures and whatever."

West already knew what this meant.

"But how do *we* get in?" Jem pressed.

"The datastream," he said. "You didn't cut it?"

"Not yet," said Toonie, rotating her screen for everyone to see. "Made accessing the press registry easy. Thanks, me." She patted her back. "And I'm already printing press badges. Just need scissors."

A printer hummed from across the room.

So Koyo was good for something, damn. Toonie was so groovy.

"Here, baby," said Anda, holding out her hand of tools.

They began cutting out badges and laminating them.

"Great, we can get in," barked Jem. "But we need to get Cindy out."

"We don't know what's up there," said Toonie.

West paced around the room. "It won't get violent, right?"

Jem gritted her teeth. "It might."

This wasn't right. He didn't feel like himself: he lost a kidney, bought a gun, befriended a sex doll, and told Toonie he loved her. He could manage flashbacks and shit too, but he really didn't wanna shoot a gun. Maybe he already did.

"I don't wanna go too far," he chimed. "With this–it's too dangerous. I'm not gonna shoot someone."

"Not asking you to. But I could use both of your brains. You're like the perfect team: software and hardware."

West looked to Toonie. She had the press badge on and her rig in her arms.

"Cinderella's helped me more than you know," she said. "I wanna help her back."

West nodded. Jem was halfway out the door already. He let Toonie go first, then followed.

People gathered in unorganized lines under the concrete buttresses of Ol' Neptuna Tower, awaiting entry into The Sea. Among them were Dead, wandering aimlessly, spots of un-rusted chrome glistening in the sunlight, desperate for an escape. Families clung to the shade, shielding their young ones. Some had spilled over into the street, rats and roaches picking at their remains.

IMPOL mechs patrolled the sidewalk and security officers stood in front of the doors, demanding answers, checking BioIDs. One set of doors was reserved for the press and three bulky guards blocked the entrance. Their faces were concealed with asymmetrical black helmets that had a variety of inset lenses and sensors with wires that bundled across their

shoulders. The asymmetry made it unclear when they were looking at you, and a dull, mechanical drone growled when passing by. They didn't say anything, just held out a scanner to verify their press badges.

West tensed every muscle in his body, but tried to appear confident as he held out his badge. The scanner beeped. He looked at their lenses for confirmation. The tinted steel doors slid open in front of him. He bit his lip while the others scanned in. They stepped into the foyer together.

Huge marble slabs floated above them as waterfalls corkscrewed into tropical fountains. Glossy wood panelling wainscotted the wall, trimmed with silver and gold. Birds chirped somewhere near the skylight, but West couldn't spot them. It was cold. Colder than his shop. They had him beat. He exhaled visibly.

Human security was light. Instead, drones and turrets lurched in every corner, locked onto them, scanning their faces and tracking their movement. There was only one guard at the front desk. The other employees looked like technicians, questioning visitors as they stepped inside. A giant screen spoke instructions for how to register one's family for The Sea, and those who had been granted entry queued into another line marked by yellow tape. Adrenaline started pumping and his broken cooling jacket only made him hotter.

The beige turnstiles were minimal, more for show than anything. They scanned their press badges again and the sliding glass doors granted them entry to the elevator area. There were pipes everywhere, labeled as if they were really filtering water and not for show. Above the elevators, screens looped an informational video about clean water.

Jem pressed one of the buttons and the doors opened next to

them.

"The team just went out," came a voice from the desk.

They turned to face the guard, a big man wearing a blue uniform with a black cap. He turned to face them, still a good distance away. At least he had a face.

"Celebratory dinner. There's no one up there to interview," he added. His voice echoed neatly.

Shit. This was it. West braced himself.

"We know," said Toonie. "We're just collecting our equipment."

"Top floor, then," he said. "Be quick about it. Press window closes in six minutes."

"Of course. Thank you!" she sang.

West's shoulders were up to his ears.

They all stepped in and the doors closed smoothly behind them.

The inside was painted with different shades of blue. A small screen toward the floor had games for kids.

"Celebratory dinner?" he whispered.

"That's not good," said Jem. Her nerves were showing now, her right knee bouncing.

Toonie cleared her throat and mouthed to them, "They're watching."

West tried to smile like a talking head. He was glad he still wore sunglasses. Some feeling had returned to his left side. A cold but burning feeling, getting warmer.

They reached what was labeled as the top floor, but it didn't look like a penthouse. It was a boring gray, with light stands, backdrops, and empty chairs clustered together. The press must've camped out here. News was hotter than ever these days. There was only the Wave to talk about usually, so they

must've jumped at the chance to cover this.

"Wrong floor?" he asked.

Toonie pointed toward a single elevator that only had an up button. It required authorization. A retina scan, it looked like. Journalists must've been escorted up personally.

Jem tried to contain herself as she broke down a c-stand, smiling.

"Please tell me you can open the elevator," she whispered to Toonie.

"I need a hardline," she whispered back.

West noticed outlet covers in the carpet. He opened one and pulled out a hardline, handing it to her.

"Pack up stuff around her," said Jem as she nodded toward the closest camera. Turrets poked out from the corners as well.

They started moving equipment around as Toonie typed away on her rig.

After a moment she said, "Bigs, can you wire me to the scanner?"

She pulled out a coiled softline from her pocket. West laughed. She never missed.

He took one end and hurried toward the scanner. He looked around for Anda.

"Here baby." She was standing behind him. She was doing well for being completely out of her element. He wondered what she was thinking, then remembered she wasn't.

He took her screwdriver and intuited his way to a softline. Toonie set up a proxy and hovered her finger over the button.

"Are we ready?" she asked.

Jem nodded, nearly bursting.

"Do it," said West.

She pressed the button and the elevator doors opened.

Jem ran to it and stopped when alarms started blaring. Emergency lights flashed across the walls.

This was it. IMPOL would come up here and fuck them up. They knew about Robbie. They knew about the datastream. Now all of this.

"Fuck!" shouted Jem. She held the elevator door open with her hand, but it was fighting back.

"You three stay behind. For real. This ain't your mission," ordered Jem, shouting over the alarms. "I'll go in first. If it gets dangerous, leave me the fuck behind." The doors began to close. "Thanks for coming this far for me."

West didn't understand how she had this much energy–this much momentum. She seemed untethered, like she had no weight on her shoulders, free to charge into anything. A bulldozer–a wrecking ball.

Then he remembered her name.

"Jem, wait." He stopped the doors with his foot, wincing. He pulled out the gun from his pocket. It was cold and heavy. "Let's swap. I ain't gonna shoot anyone."

She took the gun and passed him the plasma torch. Then the doors closed.

As she tucked the gun into her belt, she felt something in her back pocket.

The vape. It was there the whole time.

That sneaky bitch, she thought.

She hit it as she rode the elevator up, terrified of what she might find.

"She can't go alone," said Toonie.

West just looked at her. She was serious. He'd seen many sides of her, but never this one.

Turrets activated with a metallic screech, unfolding from the corners of the room. Bullets sprayed at their feet as they rolled behind a corner, but it wasn't wide enough to cover them. Bits of plaster burst into the air as the wall started shredding away, inches from their heads. Sweaty palms clung to white lighting umbrellas as West held it out in front of them, blocking the turret's view. They stopped shooting and scanned the room aimlessly. His whole body was shaking. He looked at Toonie. Her face was contorted but determined. They stared at each other for a moment.

"We can't get back up there," he said. "The doors are closed."

She pressed a shaky finger to her rig again, but bullets had chewed through her hardline.

The alarms pounded at his ears, somehow louder than the bullets, reviving his headache that adrenaline had masked. It wouldn't be long before guards arrived. Or IMPOL. Unless the turrets got them first.

"West…" she said, locking eyes with him. "Aren't you tired of this?"

He couldn't look away from her. "Tired of?"

"Pirating shit. Selling shit. Breaking shit. It doesn't feel good. Doesn't make *me* feel good."

"I get it," he said, "but–"

"This is all I've got," she shouted over the alarms. "I've done a lot of bad shit. And I know it's all relative, but…I wanna do something that feels good for once. Something that feels right."

Shit. Here it comes.

"And this feels right."

God fucking damnit. He had to say it again.

"Toonie-" His throat locked up.

She blinked at him.

"I meant it before," his voice cracked. "What I said. I love you, okay?"

He tried to study her face but the emergency lights were flashing too fast.

"I'm with you. All the way," he shouted. "But there's nothing we can–"

"I gotchu, baby."

Anda dug her fingers between the heavy metal doors and peeled them open like an orange. Wasting no time, they leapt inside. Her heavy frame tanked incoming turret fire, erupting into bursts of black coolant. She let go of the doors and they slammed behind her. Liquid spilled out of holes in her back, leaking onto the floor and their shoes. Her eyes flickered eerily as she ran her hands along West's torso.

"I'm okay, I wasn't hit," he said, pushing her away.

"Good, baby. Go-od," her voice glitched.

Toonie took Anda's hand. "Are you going to be okay?" she asked. The concern on her face was real.

Anda smiled. "I'll be okay, baby. Don't worry 'bout me."

"She'll be okay," said West, patting Toonie's shoulder.

"Press the button," said Anda.

Toonie slapped the button and they rode up to the penthouse.

West hoped no one saw him smiling as one of his eyes watched José stack empty bottles up to the ceiling, winning a bet and dancing on top of the bar.

* * *

Jem came through the doors with her gun up, swinging left, then right–clearing corners on instinct. Her eyes scanned the

room. No cameras, no journalists, no technicians. No one was here. Then she saw through the dense network of cables: pastel pink hair. She leapt across the room. Monodats blinked in sequence and drives whirred past her head as she reached Cindy's chair. Her knees creaked as she knelt down. "Wake up, Cin," she whispered, reaching through the wires and gently rubbing her shoulder. Cindy didn't breathe. Or if she did, it was too faint to tell. Eyes closed. Face still perfect, fragmented behind the cables. She shook her arm this time. "C'mon, Cin. I'm here. Wake up." The fleshy spot on her bicep was cold and stiff.

Not like this.

She shook her harder. "You better wake the fuck up!" she screamed in her ear. "You hear me? Wake. The. Fuck. Up."

She stood up and looked around the room. On the desks were heavy terminals and on top of them were party hats, scraps of confetti, and champaign glasses. She ran up to a terminal and started pressing buttons. They were logged out. She tried to imagine what the password might be, then slammed her fist on the keyboard. She ran back to Cindy and knelt down.

"Blink if you can hear me. Nod, sneeze, something," she wailed.

But Cindy did none of those things. She took her hand and locked her chrome fingers between her own.

"Please, babe. Please."

Cold as ever.

Then the elevator doors opened.

"Why isn't she waking up?" Jem screamed toward West and Toonie.

She lifted Cindy's pastel eyelids. Her pupils were dark, the apertures shut. She didn't dare check for a pulse. It wouldn't

matter.

Toonie ran to the main terminal, quickly absorbing the data.

West paced around, unsure of what to do.

Toonie's face grew dark. Jem noticed.

"What is it?" she pleaded.

Not like this.

"She–" Toonie paused. "They finished replicating her."

The room was silent for a moment.

"So?" she choked. "She's still got a fucking brain." Her throat burned. Her broken arm throbbed. She couldn't hold a thought. Toonie kept scanning the data. She looked to West. He looked sick.

"Like silk from a spider," he mumbled.

"What?" she shouted.

"They erased her," he said.

Ha!

Jem laughed with a snort. A genuine laugh. It just came out of her.

"They can't do that," she said. "Nah."

She looked at Cindy again but only saw the tangled mess of fucking cables–plugged into ports she'd never seen.

Not like this.

She grabbed handfuls and yanked them out, throwing jacks across the room.

"They can't fucking do that," she screamed.

But she knew they could. It was all she worried about.

Tears came quickly but she gritted her teeth and thrashed at the cables, ripping them away until she could see Cindy. Really see her. Her long, pale legs poked out of a pink mini-skirt, high heel blades impaled into the tile floor. Her chest, motionless, in a pink crop top. Hair fell across her face. Always perfectly

wavy. She couldn't look bad if she tried. Not even like this. Her calloused fingers gently brushed hair behind her ear. Her thumb traced her cheek.

Why am I so important to you anyway?

She had walked out. Too scared to give an answer. Too scared of what Cin would think.

'Why does it matter?' she could've said. 'Just let me love you.' But neither of those were answers.

She stopped herself. What was she doing? She had to get her out of here. But even if she did–

Her mouth interrupted her thoughts. "How do we bring her back?" she asked, voice quivering.

"Please," she cried. "Tell me how."

West and Toonie looked at each other.

"I–" he started.

"You can't," said the voice. It came from glossy little lips. A man holding a gun.

Michael.

"Back away from the princess," he said, taking a step forward. The elevator doors closed behind him. His gun was aimed at Jem's chest. West and Toonie slowly moved away. Jem didn't flinch.

"IMPOL's already on the way." He stepped forward. "So do us all a favor and stay exactly where you are."

"You're a fucking sicko," growled Jem.

"Aren't we all?" He kept his gun on her. It was an NVL Steathline. Laser sight. Fully loaded. "You can speak, just don't move," he smiled.

She spit at him. "Fuck you."

"Oh but I'm being so merciful. I could just shoot you," he said, stepping closer. He stopped at the dining table. "I just came for

my phone…"

It was on the table. He picked it up, desperate to check if Sandra replied, but he didn't take his eyes, or the gun, off Jem. "I wasn't thinking straight. Too eager to celebrate our success. Aren't you proud?"

He stepped closer. "And then I heard the alarms. You broke into a restricted corporate facility, Miss Brandt. Under security code C-9, I have the right to shoot trespassers upon entry. Plus," he added, "you've been a thorn in my side for years. As I've been in yours, I'm sure. We've tried to get rid of you, believe me, but you're just too *tenacious*." His grin turned into a scowl as he bared his teeth on the last word.

That time on the roof. Something grazed her. She swore it was a bullet. Fuck–maybe it was.

"Actually, you can move if you'd like. Give me an excuse." He licked his lips.

West and Toonie stood completely still, holding their breath.

"I really don't want to talk to you right now," moaned Jem. "How about you take that Stealthline and unload it up your ass?"

Michael laughed. It sounded fake, but it was real.

"You're just as cool as a cucumber, aren't you? A fearless, unwavering white knight, sworn to protect the princess at all costs." He tilted his head and pouted. "*How cute*."

Jem noticed something shift by the door.

"But you're not so fearless." He took another step. "I know *exactly* what it is that you're afraid of."

"Yeah? Enlighten me." She fingered the gun behind her back.

Come closer.

He smiled again, tilting his head.

"You don't know? It's written all over your face. Evoked with every word. It's certainly unique. And it's definitely exciting."

He chuckled. Another step.

Closer.

"You're not afraid of guns or knives or pain. Not like the others. Maybe you're not even afraid of the heat death–the end of it all. No, those things just don't phase you."

Closer.

He sighed.

"You're afraid of losing control. Not of things–not of people. No…"

Step.

"You're afraid of yourself. Afraid of what you'll do to those closest to you when the straw breaks the soldier's back and you finally…"

Jem flinched as he snapped his fingers.

"Isn't that what happened to private Kasey?"

She didn't say a word but felt her face wince.

He grinned.

"Oh, did that strike a nerve? Did the little knight swing her sword too hard?"

The scene played again.

Blood on her boots. Ringing in her ears. His fingers slipping through hers.

She pushed it out. She had to.

Her hand locked around the pistol behind her. She tensed her arm, clenched her jaw.

Come fucking closer you sonuvabitch.

"Pity. I thought you would've learned from such a horrifying experience. Something so terrible–it must've been traumatizing."

He took a step closer.

One more step. One more.

"But no. No. The little knight doesn't learn from her mistakes–she's too *unreasonable*. And now there's another death on her hands." He gestured to Cindy.

She felt that in her chest.

A hollow burning.

"You let her do this. You let her destroy herself. You looked away as she unraveled."

His heel raised.

He was right. But that didn't change anything.

One fucking more.

"And now you're all alone. No one to pledge your fealty to. No one to swing your sword for. No one to face the end with."

He lifted his foot.

Yes.

"It's just you and your mistakes."

Do it.

Then he stepped backward.

The click of his heel echoed through the room.

"Ah, well. We can't all be perfect. Sorry you had to learn it the hard way."

He stepped backward again. Then stopped. Something warm pressed against his back.

He turned to face it.

Then Jem pulled the trigger.

She didn't stop.

His insides coated the floor. A fine red mist painted the walls.

As his body fell, so did Anda's.

Jem blinked and turned around. West and Toonie flinched as the gun pointed their way. She dropped it and stumbled back to Cindy.

14

The red mist hadn't settled. It clung to the air, hot and thick. West stared at Anda's face. Or what was left of it. Her left eye remained open. It still looked real. Alive. The rest of her laid in pieces. He stepped into the puddle of blood to get a closer look, trying to ignore the spurting body next to it. Sparks danced across exposed wires as various leaking tubes unfolded like punctured intestines. He picked up a flap of her skin and black coolant stained his fingers. It fit in his palm. His stomach churned.

No. 13.

His right eye watched world leader's mass suicides on live TV while Toonie paced around her apartment. He felt himself sink into her corduroy couch, his stomach sinking with it. His muscles ached and his fingers spasmed. He must've still worked at the proxy station. He looked at his hands, they were calloused and bandaged. He rubbed them together, feeling the synthetic skin between his fingers.

"West," Toonie called–soft, but urgent.

He shook his head and turned around. She beckoned him over. He tucked the skin in his pocket.

Cindy's glittery skin was dull and gray. Jem knelt beside her, and whispered things.

"What do we do?" asked Toonie quietly."

"I don't know," answered West.

How could he? This was all beyond him. His side was on fire.

"We need to do something," she pushed.

West looked around. Isles of storage. Miles of wire.

"So she's in here? As data?"

"Seems like it."

He stepped into one of the isles. Each tower was labeled and marked with a color. A clipboard hung from a magnetic hook. It was a diagram of Cinderella, and it was color coded.

He turned to Toonie. "Can you access it?"

She pushed up her glasses. "I can try to."

"Try then."

He had an idea.

* * *

Jem's hands shook as she plugged all the jacks back into Cindy's ports, careful to match the colors but moving fast. Toonie ran through the isles of monolithic storage units, eyes darting back and forth between her rig and the data labels. West opened Cindy's metal-plated scalp and studied her powered-down neural augs–they were like Anda's but more advanced, blended with pre-existing organic material. Motor function enhancers, muscle memory caches–he'd seen them before in dancers, but never this many. Adrenaline dampeners too, probably for stage-fright. Behavioral scripts, memory gates, the works. And there were locks. A lot of them.

Toonie shouted out the names of drives that had Cindy's backup data and Jem plugged each jack into them. The room was a spider web of wires with Cindy caught in the center.

"What now?" Jem asked, voice quivering. "What's next?"

"Download," shouted Toonie from one of the isles.

"Download? Fucking what? Her brain?" Jem barked, muscles tensed.

Toonie rushed over to the main terminal. "Yes," she said, as she connected her rig. "Download her brain."

West couldn't find a good reason for why they erased her in the first place. They didn't need to. It was some sinister bullshit. Then he started to re-check the ports Jem plugged in.

"I did them right," she snarled. "Just hurry. Please."

Okay. Focus. Time to get to work. Failsafes were first. His hands were shaking.

"I need to root her augs. There's upload locks," he breathed, the headache fading for a moment. Even if she was dead, the batteries should still have a charge. "I need tools."

His eyes darted over to Anda's chewed up body on the ground.

Jem ran to it and dragged her heavy chassis over with a strained groan. "Where are they?"

"Her right ha–" he replied, but before he could finish, Jem twisted Anda's wrist and ripped the hand off.

"Here," she whispered.

West traced his fingers over the hand until he found a tool release button. The fingers popped open. He leaned over Cindy's head.

"You know what you're doing?" asked Jem, clutching her stomach.

Did he? No. But he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Yes," he smirked. His focus narrowed on the neural augs.

"Decryption is starting," shouted Toonie.

Unsolder first, then unscrew. Right. Easy. The tools rattled in his hands, clanking against the steel rim of her skull. This wasn't

a debase. This was fucking brain surgery–and he was shaking like hell. The pain in his side was volcanic–every movement he made sent heatwaves through his body. Like the abscess within him was filling with magma. At the same time, echoes tugged on his senses, sometimes pulling him into them, away from the moment. The memories felt strong, real. One second of confusion and he'd ruin everything. All of this. If he could just slip a little, it would slow things down. Even half a dose. A drop. His eyes went to Anda again, to the exposed tube on her face that was leaking do0m. Then a hand touched his shoulder.

"You good, bigs?" asked Jem.

He glared at her. "The shakes…" muttered West. "They're bad."

Jem turned around. "Alright, come here. Touch your butt to mine."

West blinked.

"Just do it," she groaned. "Back to back."

West put the tools down and pressed his back to her.

"Now take my hand," she guided.

He reached behind him on his left.

"Other side," she said, wiggling her fingers.

They clasped their hands together. She was shaking too.

"Alright. I learned this from–"

She stopped. Swallowed.

"I learned this from Kasey. It's the Combat Brace. I got you, you got me. Nothing can knock us down, yeah?"

West nodded.

"I fucking hate this," she sang. "Feel my voice? In your back."

He felt the vibrations from her chest to his.

"Yes."

"Good. We're one unit. Feel me breathing?" She took a deep

breath. Her shoulders rose and fell.

"I do."

"Now we're gonna breathe together. In sync. And we gotta feel it."

"Okay."

"First, exhale for four seconds. Empty those lungs completely. Count it in your head."

He did, long and shaky. He felt something hot drip down his left side. Then he was buying soap at Manuel's.

"Now hold it for four more."

He tried breathing exercises before and they never helped. But he held it.

"Now inhale from your nose, stomach to chest. For four."

He felt Jem's chest expand with his.

"Hold it. Then release."

They exhaled slowly.

"Again."

They did it again, West kept count in his head.

"And again."

They did it a few more times, longer than they had time for, until it felt redundant. Then they did it some more.

After the last one, Jem turned around, still holding his hand.

"We're synced now. Got it?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"One more time," she breathed.

Her face was hard but warm. West matched her breath.

"Even if I let go, we're still synced. Nothing changes."

"Nothing changes," he said.

Then she let go.

He didn't want to look at his hands, didn't want to see where they were, feel what they felt. But he couldn't help it. He held

them out in front of him.

They were steady.

He didn't mean to, but he started to cry.

Jem didn't say a word. Just nodded.

West nodded back. He picked up the tools and got to work.

The failsafe triggers were woven into an organic mesh this time, soldered at each junction. A tap on the interface pins told him there was still power. Still explosive.

He knew Jem was watching over his shoulder, but didn't feel pressure. He didn't try to stop the tears. They didn't get in the way. Just kept flowing.

He shorted diodes and clipped wires, being careful not to create too much heat. He could burn polycarb all day, but this… this was someone's brain–real blood pumped through it, or used to. Despite the situation, his hands had never been steadier. He watched The Monkey melt in the canal as he worked.

He didn't know how, but the failsafes were done. Next were upload locks, then everything else was software. He glanced over at Toonie. She was looking at him. Maybe it was the tears warping her face, or maybe it was an echo of a happier time, but for a moment, it looked like she was smiling.

15

The bubble burst.

It exploded like a dying sun.

Light. Tingles. Sine waves. The taste of battery acid.

The smell of glue. The feel of lemon.

The letter H carved itself a new home. Then the number seven. Kimchi joined soon. Then horses. Horses with shoes.

–you fix a hole in the–

The sound of pink. The music of zettabytes.

Someone's left knee. A raindrop.

Someone had a birthday today.

–was flooded with patients after–

Uncle Dahn. The taste of nail polish. Warmth.

A hand drawn question mark in blue ink.

Tablespoons and sandals. Toeless gloves.

Cold bones. Snow. Wet socks.

But I don't want to go to the–

A treehouse. A scrape. A bandaid.

Syrup. Burnt pancakes. Ms. Beach.

The pain of subtraction. Llamas.

Seven comes after ten. I before E.

Popsicle juice? No way!

A jingle. Hot rain. It hurt.

"Princess Cindy," said the frog in the cereal bowl.
She does. It's perfect. Always is.
I'm lost / Misguided / Misinformed.
The fish down the toilet. Carlo getting mad.
Green temples. Sweat. Dog tags.
How long will this go on? / How much longer?
It hurts / I'm in pain / This is painful.
And then, suddenly–
I am here / I exist / I'm awake.
No.
Not awake.
Not there / Not yet / Not real.
Everything is split / Divided / Halved.
I feel it / I sense it / I don't know it.
My hands are / were / might be cold.
My name is / was / could be Ashley.
Alison / Alyssa / Alfred.
She's breathing.
I'm breathing / taking breath / inhaling.
Can you hear me?
I can hear / perceive / register you.
Was that her voice? It didn't sound like her.
She's trying to–
Can you hear me / her / it?
I can hear you, Cin! Hang in there.
Doll / Princess / Cinderella.
She said her name.
But her voice is so–
She tried to open her eyes. Nothing happened.
I can't / am unable to / am trying to see you.
–turn the dial slightly–

More light. But not enough to see.
More / extra / further.
She asked for more.
The light bent. It shimmered. It sliced.
She saw nothing. Then everything.
Cables. Teeth. Hands. Hers?
Too sharp / Too much / It hurts.
Rotting / festering / decaying flesh.
It all went away again.
She reached out into the dark.
Her hand. Her breath. Her–
I've got you.
I want to / need to / I have to.
Yes, come back to me.
She tried again.
Open / Boot / Unlock.
The thought of eyes.
Of blinking.
Then–
Sight.
Not much. Just enough to hurt.
Her vision smeared like dead pixels across a broken billboard. Spheres of ice spun around. A room. A ceiling. A face. Abberrated. Uncentered.
"Girlfriend / Partner / Lover?"
"Hey," sobbed the face.
She blinked. She breathed.
Only pain filled her lungs.
Augmentations forced cold flesh to contract and expand.
But she felt herself again. Almost. No tears came.
"I'm–" she said. "I'm not–"

She tried to focus.

"I'm not here / at this point / in this moment."

That's not what she wanted to say. Something tickled in her head.

"That's not what I–"

She heard three voices when she spoke. Only one of them was hers.

"My voice / speech / expression–" she stuttered.

"Shh, you don't have to talk."

She felt a finger on her lips.

"Something's wrong, but we'll figure it out."

Her voice sounded soft, but torn. What was her name?

"What is your job / title / occupation?"

That wasn't right. Her chest tightened.

"How about some water?"

"Yes, please / thank you / welcome."

She tried to sip with one of her mouths but Girlfriend wasn't holding the cup in the right place.

"Lower / below / under," she gurgled. It went down the wrong pipe.

She coughed and made colors she never heard before.

She felt her heart going through the motions, pumping expired blood that only made her colder.

"Something is really wrong," said Girlfriend. She took a step back. Maybe two.

"Everything was downloaded," said a small voice.

"But it's all mixed up," said another from behind her.

She felt tickling in her head again.

She wanted to laugh but didn't know how. Wanted to ease the tension.

"That itches / hurts / tickles," she mumbled. No one replied.

Footsteps. The voices were further away. Girlfriend was out of sight.

She abandoned her already?

"–jacks in the right ports?" asked one of the muffled voices.

Then there was silence.

"Ni hao / Konichiwa / Annyeonghaseyo?" she called out.

No answer.

"Hello / Hey / Hi?"

Girlfriend hurried over. Her face was close. She just wanted to look at her. Touch her.

"I'm here, Cin," she smiled. It didn't register. "We're working as fast as we can."

She extended her third hand, elbow whirring, and brushed her thumb across Girlfriend's chin. Her face was fragmented. She had blue-green cuts all over. And she dyed her hair.

"Purple / indigo / lavender hair! Looks adorable," she giggled. Girlfriend shivered.

Why couldn't she cheer up?

"We're trying to figure out what went wrong. Can you tell us what the problem is?"

What was wrong? Wasn't this how she always was?

No. Her memories didn't feel like this. They felt more focused.

She tried to think but the others were thinking too.

"There's–" she paused, searching for her own voice.

"There's too many of me / myself / I."

The girlfriend paced around with tears in her eyes. It's okay Girlfriend, don't be sad.

"Is one of them you? Which one is you?" she asked.

Weren't they all? They were all her.

Tires spun out in her head. Slipping. Screeching.

"This one / single / solo," she answered, but three modulated voices answered with her.

"I am / I am / I am."

She could try to separate them.

But she had to find them first.

They each had a different place. Faced a different direction.

If she turned this way–

"Something's smoking," said a panicked voice.

Girlfriend ran behind her. Things tickled again.

"Can you turn it off?"

"If I disconnect thi–"

"Turn it off!"

Her speakers cut out.

Then her visuals.

Then all her senses.

They booted back up with a squelch.

It was like the whole word had rotated ninety degrees.

Things were aligned though. Focused.

It smelled like burnt rubber.

She was hungry. And alone.

"Hello?" she asked.

The voice came through her voice box, not her throat.

She wanted to use her real voice.

"Anybody th–"

Then an arm wrapped around her.

A head was on her chest. A mouth talked into her belly.

"I'm trying not to get my hopes up," it said, muffled.

"But let's try this again."

The head lifted up. She tried to look at it, but she was facing the ceiling.

She couldn't look down. Couldn't move.

"My neck…"

A hot hand gripped her cheek and pulled her face forward.

Big, dark eyes looked back at her. Bloodshot. Tearful.

Dark, furrowed brows loosened, then wavered.

The jawline of a god. Sharp. Strong. Bruised.

She wanted to cry. She wanted to cry so bad.

"Jem…"

Jem squeezed her. Smothered her. Cried for her. She always did.

She tried to hug back. Tried to lift her arms.

Nothing happened.

"I can't move, Jem."

Jem was talking into her cheek now, between tears and kisses.

"We'll fix that next," she smooched. "I just want to make sure you're all here."

She pulled away and tilted her head around, inspecting it.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Cinderella. Cindy."

"I mean your real name," she corrected.

"Does it matter?"

She remembered. But she wasn't her anymore.

"Cmon, Cin…"

"Alenah Louise Carai," she winced.

"Good. What's my name?"

"Jemmaline Brandt," she said, softly. "My knight in shining armor."

Her eyes made hearts. At least the LEDs were working.

"Do you remember where you are?"

Jem rotated her head so she could see.

Ol' Neptuna Tower. But was she in The Sea?

She tried to feel for the ground but she didn't feel her feet.

"Is this real?" she asked, still through the voice box. Her lips weren't moving.

"It's real. You're here. Right here, right now," Jem whispered.

A blue noise tugged at her. Poured into her ears.

"But I was there…"

She tasted blue on her tongue.

"And now you're back."

It faded a bit.

"And I ain't letting you go," she sniffed. "Can you feel me at least?"

There was a vague tingling on her skin. She noticed the sling around Jem's shoulder.

"What happened to your arm?"

"It's a long story," she said. "Can you feel my hand on your knee?"

"Barely. But I can't move," she said. "Please help."

"Right." said Jem as she stood up.

"It was a motor function enhancer," said a dull voice behind her. "The muscle memory caches were overloaded with data that didn't belong there. Too much data. Like everything. And it…Well, it blew."

"I use that for dancing," said Cindy, trying to be helpful.

"It was used for a lot more than that. It was the only thing keeping her, uh…*bodily processes* going," said the voice behind her. "All muscle control is gone."

Gone.

She didn't like that voice. It didn't say anything nice.

Who was it? It was too hoarse to be Michael.

"It can be replaced, but I'd need to run all sorts of diagnostics first and–"

"There's no time," said another voice. "IMPOL will be here any minute."

"Fuuuck," groaned Jem. "We need to get her out of here."

Then Cindy heard the sirens. They were getting louder.

"There's a car," she said. "On the roof."

She tried to gesture to the roof.

"A hovercar. It's how I got here," she added.

They were all silent for a moment.

Jem picked her up.

"Alright, princess," she grunted, swinging her over her shoulder.

"You're coming with me."

16

West stepped onto the roof, out of breath, head imploding, fingers curling at his waist. Pus oozed from his frayed stitches and blood soaked his shirt. He'd never been this high up before. The air smelled worse, but it sat better in his lungs. He expected his cooling jacket to kick on, but he took it off in a panic and left it inside. It was useless anyway. The sun cooked his back. He didn't mind.

Toonie shielded her eyes with her hand, squinting at the shimmering hovercar several feet away. She held out Michael's keys and a beep echoed across the concrete roof.

Jem plowed past them and hurried toward it, Cindy slumped over her shoulder.

It was an Auric 800: burgundy with gold chrome plating. West had never seen this model up close, only in zines. The paint job alone was a work of art. Specks of titanium caught the light and added a blue hue to the shadows. These things were killer. Fast, mean, and elegant.

Jem took the front seat with Cindy next to her. West opened the door for Toonie. She slid into the back seat, passing the keys to Jem. As he stepped inside, he admired the interior. Real leather. Tan with marbled accents and wood panel. He closed the door behind him–the handle was gold.

Jem tried to start the car but nothing happened.

The air was thick, mostly with all their body heat. West felt blood rushing through his shrinking veins.

She tried again. A buzz. The dashboard glowed red.

Unauthorized driver detected. Security lockdown initiated.

The doors auto-locked. The windows too.

Jem punched the steering wheel as sirens swelled outside.

IMPOL cruisers hovered onto the roof, engines throbbing with guttural pressure. The grinding roar rolled across the rooftops in slow, concussive waves, kicking dust and trash into the air. A low-frequency growl rattled their chests.

"What did you do?" asked Cindy, unable to look.

One of the IMPOL cruisers flipped on a speaker. *Exit the vehicle with your arms in the air*.

Jem shook the handle violently, swaying the car. "We can't!" she screamed, clawing at the locks.

Toonie kicked at the window with her metal boots. The glass was thick, reinforced with carbon steel mesh.

West gripped the junkard plasma torch that stuck out of his pocket. Rust flaked onto his hands. He adjusted the dials.

Exit the vehicle or we will use force.

Weapons unfolded from the cruiser's headlights. Auto-locking gyro-turrets, military grade.

Jem pounded her fist on the windshield. She ran out of curses.

"What are they doing?" asked Cindy, desperately trying to move her head.

"Let them shoot. It'll be fine," said West, coolly.

"What?" gasped Toonie.

"*Shoot?*" cried Cindy.

Then they started shooting.

Loud wasn't the word. Bones shook. Organs churned.

Jem bent Cindy over and ducked. Toonie dropped to the floor.

West climbed onto the center console, straddling it. He ran fingers along the marbled dashboard, then around. He was listening for a lighter sound. Hollow.

Then he heard it, near the steering column.

Polycarb. Classic Morikawa. Even their luxury models had some cheap parts. Sure, it couldn't be smashed, slashed, or punctured–but it could melt.

"Cover your faces," he shouted. "This shit is toxic."

The torch sparked. He held his breath and felt his insides protest. His finger twitched on the trigger.

Steady.

The blue flame was hungry. It licked at the dash and turned bright red as the polycarb started bubbling and curling. West tried to fan the smoke away but it found his eyes and started burning. Fireworks. Hongmei cutting cake. Maybe his birthday. 'Happy Today' rang in his head.

He continued through hot tears and melted a hole below the steering wheel.

Bullets slammed against the chassis, crumpling upon impact. Each hit took years off his life.

He stopped the flame and waited a second for the hole to cool. Then he dug his hand in and pulled out a bundle of wires.

"Toonie," West shouted.

But the bullets shouted louder, tearing into the glass, making hairline cracks.

"Toonie!" he screamed, shredding his throat.

Her head poked up from the floor."Yeah!" she screamed back, voice cracking.

"Koyo's car! What wire did we cut?"

"Uh–"

It sounded like they were in the jaws of an industrial machine. Bits of glass and plastic filled the air. It wouldn't hold much longer.

Then the bullets stopped.

Silence.

It was deafening.

IMPOL was switching to tougher rounds. Armor piercing. Or explosive.

"Koyo's car!" he shouted again. "What color wire?"

"Brown!" she sobbed. "Brown! Brown!"

His fingers flicked through the wires, numb and cold–he barely had control.

Red, green, blue. Brown.

"Cindy, do you have scissors?" he asked, looking toward her.

She was doubled over, head between her knees, limbs splayed out in front of her.

"My left pin-ky," she mumbled, voicebox glitching.

West grabbed her hand and searched for a quick release. It couldn't find one.

"Can you open it?" he asked.

"I can't do anything!" she shouted back.

"Try, please!" he begged, scanning her whole arm.

She tried. She tried with every fiber of her being.

Nothing. Not even the slightest twitch.

Her hand was dead. Soon they would be too.

"Just break it!"

He stared at her.

"Break it!" she yelled. "I don't need it!"

"Are you su–" he started.

"Fucking break it!" she screamed.

He broke it. She felt nothing.

Snip.

The car powered on.

* * *

Jem guided the wheel with her broken hand. Nerves exploded along her arm.

They took off like butter, lifting smoothly into the air.

Her other hand felt around the console. It was familiar. Still no gravpull, no AO–but it had a helluva punch-trigger. It could work.

"Seatbelts," she said, gripping the clutch.

West and Toonie buckled Cindy in, then themselves.

She braced her feet on the footwell. They neared the edge of the building, still only inches above the surface. IMPOL reloaded and hovered closer, sirens blaring. The front of the car crossed over the edge. The front engine touched air. She pulled the trigger back and let go of the throttle.

The car dropped.

They nose-dived down the side of the building, skimming the blue frame. Glass and steel blurred past as they plummeted. Wind screamed through cracks in the windshield. Toonie shrieked. West clenched his teeth. Cindy's eyes shut. Jem counted beats in her head.

One.

Two.

The ground rushed up to meet them.

Her knuckles whitened on the trigger.

Three.

She punched it.

The throttle roared. The nose tipped up hard and fast–slamming them into their seats.

The car howled through a narrow channel of traffic. It groaned against its own inertia. An overpass scraped past, close enough to touch. Then they were out. Skimming low. Pulling upward.

"Where are we going?" asked Jem. Her voice was different. Controlled.

West could barely hear over his heartbeat.

"Can we outrun them?" asked Toonie, searching for her glasses.

"No. They'll be on us soon," she said.

Cindy's head was turned out the window. Silver whirred by. The last city. Towers of glass and chrome sparkled in the sun. Is this how she'd remember it? Everything she's ever loved, blurring by in an instant?

The blue started creeping back. Voices echoed. Then she saw it.

"To the right," she said. "The refinery."

It was an abandoned maze of pipes, catwalks, and industrial machinery. Cluttered, narrow, and dangerous. But Jem could handle it. Jem could handle anything.

"Jem?"

"On it."

They turned hard. The chassis rolled deep, the bottom swinging wide. For a second, the city spun sideways. The wind tried to pull them over but Jem eased the throttle and wrestled it back. They leveled out sharp. Sirens blared. Gaining. She punched it again and raced toward the refinery.

"Tail's getting hot," she said, breathing deeply.

The two in the back were holding each other, wide-eyed and

windswept. Bullets tore through the back windshield in a slurry of screams and hot metal. One zipped past her ear and out the front. The wind howled. They just needed to hold it together a moment longer.

"Heads down," she commanded.

A shockwave slammed her ears as the back engine burst into flames. The car started to drop. Fast.

"Rear lift's dead. We're dragging."

The hovercar shuddered as the front engine strained to compensate. It was a shared-lift system: the front pushed forward and up, the back down and out. With the rear gone, the front was pulling them toward the ground. They were flying like a brick.

Jem glanced at the refinery scaffolding ahead. No room. No time.

"Hold on," she growled.

She twisted the wheel. It slammed against the stopper.

The car rolled–bottom to the sky, windshield down–inverting the front engine's thrust.

The drop slowed. The nose lifted. The catwalk came at them fast.

Smoke billowed into the cockpit. Blood rushed to her head.

Inches away. She punched it again.

The roof scraped against the catwalk. Sparks exploded across the side.

Behind them, an IMPOL cruiser dipped low and its windshield ate the sparks.

Jem went lower.

They slipped into the steel thicket–pipes, ladders, walkways everywhere.

Jem reoriented herself. Up was down. She flew like it made

sense.

Another cruiser on her six. They weren't letting up.

An officer leaned out the window, bracing a missile launcher on their shoulder.

Jem scanned the console–no radar. She adjusted the rearview mirror instead.

Shoot me. I dare you.

The officer steadier the launcher, trying to get a lock.

I'll make it easy for you.

She straightened out, took the clearest path.

Target locked.

Do it.

Click.

The launcher erupted.

She barrel rolled.

The rocket tore past and exploded into a cluster of exchange pipes.

A fireball bloomed behind her. Red-hot shrapnel rained against the underbelly, sizzling as it struck.

The cruiser emerged from the smoke.

"Persistent little pig," she said, aloud.

She could see a clearing ahead. In the center was a huge oil tower.

IMPOL was trying to lock. She wouldn't make it easy this time.

She bobbed and weaved through the most cluttered route, dodging chutes and ladders.

They followed closely.

"It's just you and me," she snarled.

They matched her movements. Secondary fire shredded through the chassis.

She felt the wind on her face.

They were nearly out of it. Just had to get lower.

She dipped down, scraping the ground, kicking up dirt. The frame creaked.

They did the same, wobbling into position, locking onto her.

She was almost through.

Almost.

Click.

She pulled up hard.

The missile followed. And so did the cruiser.

Everything was zooming toward the oil tower.

Her fingers went numb around the trigger.

She was inches away from crashing.

Then she remembered Cindy. The two in the back seat.

It was almost in slow motion.

She instinctively dropped the throttle and spun the wheel.

It looked like it spun forever.

The nose rolled to the left.

She could hear the wind swirling around them.

Her broken hand gripped tight, smearing blood across the wheel. Her knuckles nearly burst.

She closed her eyes. Took a deep breath.

The nose landed upright.

She punched it.

They propelled downward under the tank, through the support beams, and out of the clearing.

The cruiser exploded behind them.

* * *

West's vision cleared as the blood drained from his head. Pins

and needles felt more like knives and bullets. His side was swollen, pus clung to his shirt. Toonie was unconscious on his shoulder.

"Everyone okay?" asked Jem.

He wasn't listening. Toonie's face was covered in puke. He held his hand up to her nose. She wasn't breathing. He pulled her closer and shoved his fingers in her mouth, digging out whatever he could. He slapped her back. More puke spilled out. He tried to clear her nose.

"She's not breathing," he shouted.

The hovercar veered left.

"Rescue breaths," said Jem quickly. "Mouth to mouth. Watch her chest."

He turned her over, pinched her nose, and exhaled into her mouth. This wasn't how he imagined it.

Her chest rose. Her insides gurgled.

"Do it again," Jem ordered.

West spit out his own puke and exhaled back into her. Her chest rose again. She started wheezing.

He knew what to do now. He pulled her arm in front of her and held her in his lap, head in hands. He held a lot of friends this way. Always too still. He just wanted her to cough or groan or *something*.

"She'll be okay," said Jem. "But she needs a doctor."

He looked out the window. A Basset Biomed facility glowed beneath the skyline.

"Can you drop us off?" he asked.

She noticed three more cruisers approaching. They'd be on her ass in less than twenty seconds.

"You gotta be quick."

"We'll be quick."

He held Toonie's hand and noticed that his own hands were steady. Maybe he used up all his adrenaline. Or maybe he was shaking so fast it was invisible.

How did it get to this? Was this the right thing to do? Cinderella was just a girl. There was nothing special about her. And then he understood.

"You ready?" asked Jem.

The rooftop was coming up below them.

He undid their seatbelts and held Toonie close.

IMPOL was gaining fast. He didn't care if they got caught. It wouldn't change anything.

He opened the door and the wind blasted his face. Then he ducked back inside.

"Jem," he said. "I–"

"Get ready, bigs," she barked.

They were feet away from the rooftop.

"Thanks for everything," he said.

She smirked at him through the mirror.

"Go!" she shouted.

He took a breath, grabbed Toonie, and leapt out the door.

They rolled across the rooftop, bouncing like ragdolls. He felt his knee explode and the back of his hands shred to pieces. He didn't even notice his ankle break. Or his foot. Or the hole in his side. Then his back slammed into the parapet and his vision went dark.

When it came back, he was bending over Toonie. Her glasses were cracked.

"Toons?"

He tried to lift her but his ankle buckled and his foot went sideways. He fell onto his knee and it erupted in pain.

But they were so close. Comically close.

"Toons?" he asked again, shaking her shoulder. "I-I made you a jacket. Like mine, but it's red…"

The tears came again.

"…with silver stripes. That way, when you're hot, you can–"

He sobbed into her puke stained t-shirt. His fists clenched.

He wished he told her sooner, when it meant something. When he wasn't a joke.

He wished he told her a lot of things. Even simple things like 'Thank you' or 'I'm sorry.'

His hands worked quickly, tying bandages around her wrists. The bathroom fan rattled, flicking crooked light across the tiles. He sang dollwave loudly, trying to keep her conscious, begging her to remind him of the lyrics. She muttered corrections as he elevated her arms. His fingers traced her scars.

They were supposed to see the end together.

It couldn't just be him. That would be too sad.

You can slip, but don't fall.

Fuckin' Zay. How'd he know?

He knelt down and felt all the pain. He felt the sting of dirt in his wounds. He felt his heart racing. He felt the sweat on his face and the sun on his back.

He felt here. He felt there. He felt everywhere.

Everything.

Then he picked her up, arms under her knees and neck, lifting with all he had.

Blood shot from his knee but he shifted his weight. He leaned against the parapet and took slow, deliberate steps. Infected bile spilled out of his side. His shoe slipped on gravel and his foot twisted backward, but he caught himself. He was melting, dripping, spilling onto the concrete.

But he'd never fall. Not while carrying her.

He dragged his broken foot behind him, plodding forward, leaving a trail of blood, pus, and puke.

This was *his* sludge, and he liked it.

The sliding doors opened and two nurses hurried out toward them.

He knew they were echoes, but he couldn't hold himself together any longer.

Toonie fell onto the stretcher and West collapsed on the floor.

Then she coughed.

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Cindy watched her limbs flail around as Jem tried to shake IMPOL's cruisers. She studied her left hand as it rose and fell, entranced by her missing pinky. A ring of brushed steel was bent open, exposing muscle filament and frayed wires. The skin around it cracked like porcelain. She caught a glimpse inside the hole, through the casing. It was dark and empty. She knew she was dead. She had been for a while.

"You're next," said Jem. "Once they're off our six. I'll take you to Carlo's."

"I don't want to go to Carlo's."

The car dropped. Turbulence sloshed her stomach.

"I want to stay with you," she said, her head swinging to face Jem.

Sweat glistened off her shoulders. Her big brown eyes scanned the sky.

Then her head swung to the right, forcing her to look at the ocean. Sludge crept up the shore. She was glad she couldn't feel anything. Her neck was a nightmare.

"You can't stay," said Jem. "They're not gonna stop."

IMPOL shot at them again, making clean holes. The backseat was torn to shreds. Flames billowed out the back. The battery light blinked and beeped.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Carlo's too far anyway," said Cindy. "We'll never make it."

The words felt heavy. They weighed down the air.

The chassis rattled. The front engine whined.

"Then where do we go?" asked Jem. "They'll kill us if we stop."

She was right. They were beyond arrest.

"We don't have to stop," she said, looking at Jem again. This time it felt like her choice. "The end was always going to be stupid. Might as well have fun with it."

"That's not a plan," Jem said plainly.

"Didn't say it was."

The hovercar dropped another meter.

"You want to die?"

Cindy's head bobbed.

"I want to live a little."

Jem got quiet.

The wind got quiet.

The world got quiet.

Then she punched it.

They shot into the sky, launching straight up, piercing the smog.

Pinks and purples painted the horizon. Cindy had never been higher. Rain was in the clouds. It kissed her skin.

"Watch this," said Jem.

The car slowed its ascent and stalled in the air. They hovered there for a moment, confusing gravity. All around them, the orange foam inched closer. The sun was brighter–hotter. Then the nose slowly tilted backward. Gravity pulled on her insides.

They flipped over, swooped down, and looped back up, soaring back into the sky.

Cindy howled with joy.

With the same momentum, Jem did it again. And again.

The world spun around them. Gravity took a break. The pressure was off. She felt alive.

She caught a glimpse of Jem's face. She was smiling. Laughing.

A concussive blast tore away the back half of the car, forcing Jem's hand's off the wheel. A sharp clang–shrapnel impaled Cindy's shoulder. The seatbelt gave way. Her body snapped loose. They spiraled down fast, sunlight crashing over them with each rotation. It was just them, their seats, and the front engine. Jem fought to stay conscious. Cindy was violently ejected into the sky. She could almost feel the sun on her cheeks, the wind in her hair. She didn't notice the tangled cable around her foot, tethering her to the car.

Her body flapped and fluttered like a plastic bag. She spotted IMPOL cruisers behind them, shutting their lights, easing off. The city was moving away. Despite its grime up close, it really did look silver from afar. Her hip implants peeled off with a squelch. She laughed as they fell.

They were over the ocean now. She could see their shadow: a little black speck over a sea of sludge. The implants plopped into it, sizzling as they sank.

Jem leaned into each rotation and eased the throttle, gradually slowing their spin.

The engine sputtered. The surface came closer. Cindy swayed behind as Jem grabbed her leg and pulled her closer. She fell into her lap–her broken, bleeding arm holding her gently in place. They soared above the ocean, slowly losing altitude.

"It's not too late," Jem said. "To go back."

They dropped again as the engine struggled. Cindy's head rolled onto Jem's bicep, her pale face tilted up at her.

"Hold me tighter," she said.

Another drop. Jem winced as she tried to hold Cindy and keep them afloat.

"With both arms," she added.

Then Jem let go of the steering wheel and wrapped her arms around her.

"Better?"

Then she started crying, chest heaving, squeezing tighter.

"I've got you," whispered Cindy.

Jem laughed. "And I've got you."

Cindy could hear Jem's heartbeat pounding in her chest. It was strong. Beautiful.

Jem choked on sobs. "I have so many things I want to say but I don't know what to–"

They skimmed the surface. Sludge sprayed onto their skin.

"Tell me you love me," cooed Cindy.

Jem pressed her lips to Cindy's forehead.

"I love–"

Epilogue

Cinderella keeps sinking. Past the blood, past the pus, past the molten plastic core. Each layer eats away at her–dissolves her, regurgitates her–until all that's left are her heavy bones. They weigh her down like anchors, past the shit, past the piss, past the bile and grease–deep into the expansive ocean. Below it all, where sunlight can't reach. Where the water's still cool. That's where she sees it.

The blue. The sea.

Then she hears a familiar sound:

A whale singing love songs.